UNKNOWN Worlds

25c FEB · 1943
FANTASY FICTION

WET MAGIC . . . . . by Henry Kuttner

Beneath a Welsh lake, safe from the enemies of a thousand years, Morgan le Fay had waited—and with her was Excalibur, Arthur's magic sword. Another Arthur—Arthur Woodley, American, ex-Hollywood actor, currently an A. E. F. pilot—found her there. Not that he meant to—a pair of Nazi Stukas took care of that. They, Vivienne, and Merlin, that is—

THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM . by Fredric Brown

Charlie Wills had troubles. They began when the angleworm he was trying to collect for fishing bait sprouted wings, a halo, and flew heavenward. They included a duck where a duck couldn't be, a Rumanian coin—a remarkable series of peculiar events. Because of a most strange error—

THE WITCH . . . . . by A. E. van Vogt

She was old and ugly and lonely, and she feared the sea and the night with a terrible horror. For she was of the sea—and she wanted just a bit more time to work her magic, the magic that would give her a new, younger body—

THE ULTIMATE WISH . . . . . by E. M. Hull

She was crippled, twisted—twisted even more mentally than she was physically. Her world was made up of hates, lusts for revenge, savage passions, a deadly stew of mental poisons. And to her, by accident, came the power to make one and only one wish. What wish could she make that would yield her the greatest satisfaction?

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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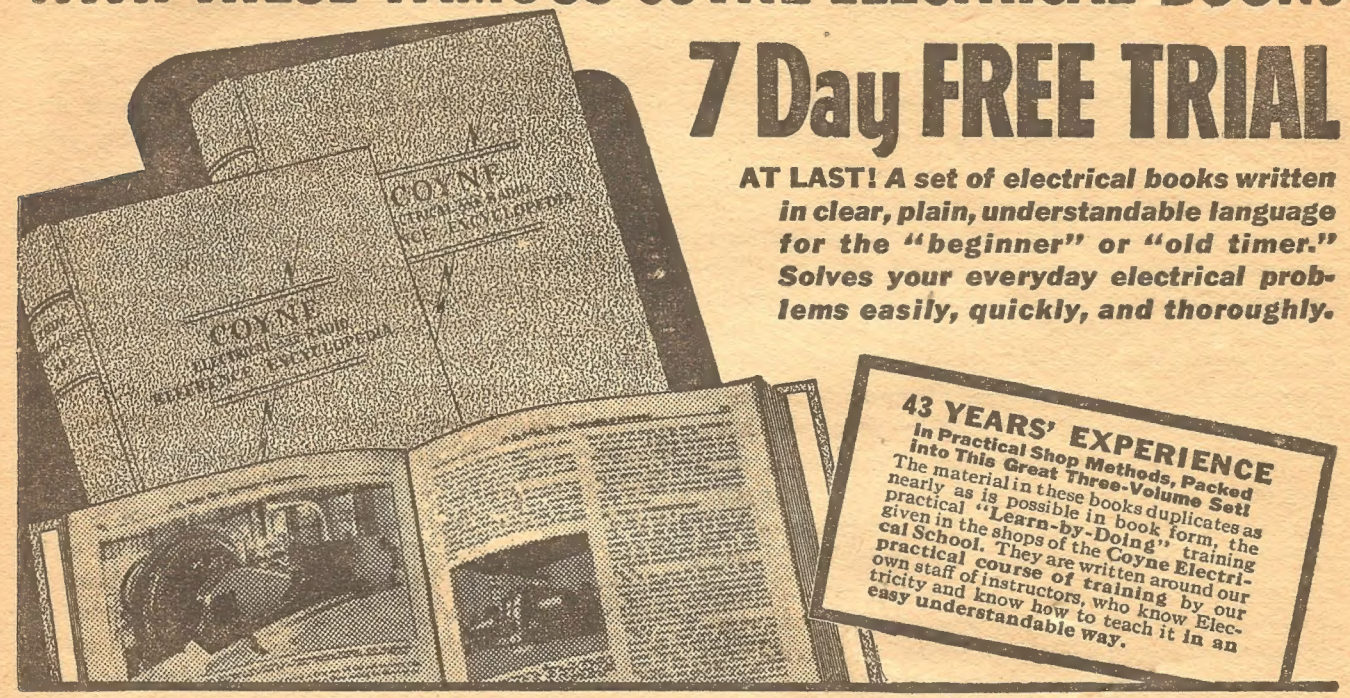

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OF THINGS BEYOND

...os seem to have decided that sul-...e and its numerous relatives work on ... germs by inhibiting their reproduction rather than by killing them outright. The result is much the same, in the long run; the race dies out.

So, seemingly, science and technology work on the beings of mythology. They leave no descendants while they themselves die of old age. For the myth-beings are not immortal; they simply have life spans many times that of human beings. Also, unlike humankind, they don't reproduce their own kind; the next generation of mythological people always differs radically from the last.

There's a fairly coherent sort of evolution, too, controlled by the cultural environment of the human beings they live among. The earliest types of cultures, the jungle peoples, are haunted by god and godlings of jungle and wild beast. Their oppressors from mythland are demon lions and jaguars, strange, terrible, unkillable and invariably cruel. These myth-beings aren't indifferent to man; they are active enemies, dangerous and consciously deadly beings who are constantly striving to overcome the charms and defenses men erect against them.

The next evolution of culture—and the next generation of myth-beings—are of distinctly different temper. The Agrarian-type culture can really be divided into two types, because of an event that took place some two thousand years ago. In the times before Christ, Agrarian cultures developed a religion that embodied the myths of the people in a formalized, officially maintained form, complete with temples and priests. The Agrarian cultures tend to develop gods who are somewhat indifferent to man, but can be cajoled into helping him, or, becoming angry at some slight offense, may visit devastating wrath upon him. They differ essentially from the jungle gods in this: they are interested in man more or less as men are interested in pets. No longer are they invariably cruel, invariably seeking to destroy man at the slightest breach in the necessary ever-vigilant defenses. The new generation of gods and goddesses the Greeks and Romans knew—Ceres and Bacchus, the harvest gods—though Bacchus had further interest in the grape harvest. The rise of a very high level of culture multiplied and further modified the myth-beings into higher level abstractions—Athena, goddess of wisdom; Venus, and others. Sea-borne commerce brought Neptune and his cohorts.

After Christ, the higher levels within the culture no longer fostered and maintained the myth-beings. There were no more high priests or temples for the harvest gods. The Agrarian culture of the Middle Ages developed the fairy and the brownie of itself. This new generation of myth-beings had lost the great and sweeping powers of their predecessors, becoming troublesome supernatural beings whose powers were, actually, not greatly beyond those of man. They did not rule the universe any more, another One was responsible for that, and only such minor mischief as might annoy remained to them.

In the eastern part of Europe, where the vast plains of Russia met the mountainous backbone of Europe, through the Caucasus, through Czech and Slovene country, in the Black Forest lands, something of the jungle culture crossed with the Agrarian. The savage wolves of the steppes still prowled isolated little farm villages. The knowledge of Christianity had come, and the knowledge of Satan-controlled evil. The danger of wolf-packs and of individual savage wolves was obviously Satan-inspired. They must be led by evil incarnate in a wolf—a werewolf.

And the miners working their laborious way into the ore bodies through central Europe were discovering other members of this new generation of myth people—the *kobalds* and *nickels,* sometimes lumped together as gnomes.

But that generation has passed on, too, now. *Kobald-kupfer* is investigated by science, and the technician begins smelting cobalt commercially, knowing its blue-green ore is not a bewitched and unsmeltable copper ore. The smell of hot lubricating oil and the rattle of pneumatic drills seem to have prevented the reproduction of the myth people; they died without issue.

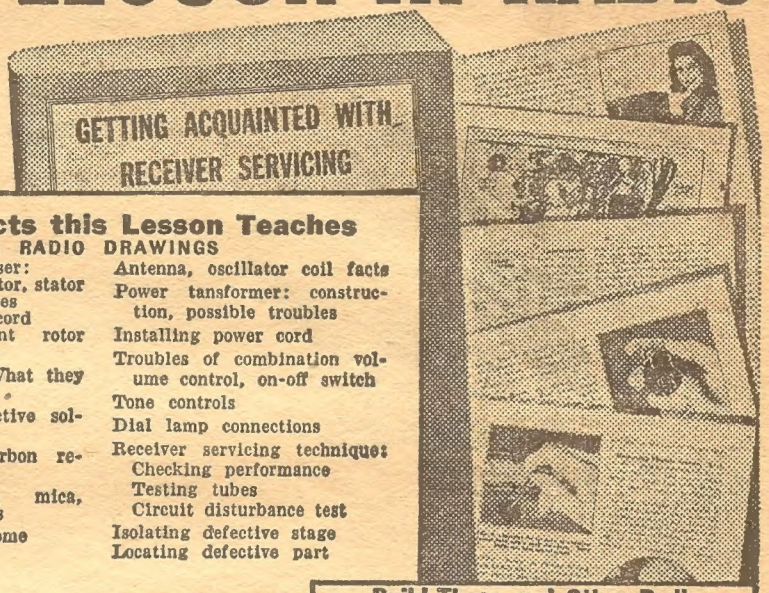
The gremlins afflicting air pilots over Europe now seem a feeble race of descendants, living only in the favorable environment of war, where chance and luck again have mighty power in saving a man's life—or taking it.

The myth-people live on chance and luck, good or ill. When it was purely a question of luck whether a crop grew or died, the brownies and the fairies lived. When it becomes a matter of lead arsenate and pyrethrum dust against the insects, and soil analysis to determine the best type of crop and most suitable type of fertilizer—

Of all the cultures man has evolved, only one has not developed its own generation of myth-beings. The steel-and-stone cities of today alone of all man's housings offer shelter to no pixies.

The Editor.

FREE LESSON IN RADIO



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How to remove tubes, tube shields

Three reasons why radio tubes fail

Electrodynamic loudspeaker:
- How it works
- Replacing damaged cone
- Recentering voice coil
- Remedies for open field coil

Output transformer construction, repair

Gang tuning condenser:
- Construction of rotor, stator
- How capacity varies
- Restringing dial cord
- Straightening bent rotor plates

I.F. transformers—What they do, repair hints

How to locate defective soldered joints

Inside story of carbon resistors

Paper, electrolytic, mica, trimmer condensers

How condensers become shorted, leaky

Antenna, oscillator coil facts

Power tansformer: construction, possible troubles

Installing power cord

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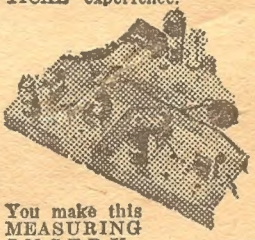

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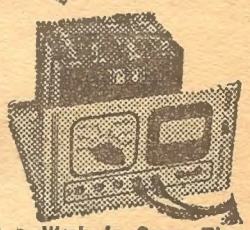

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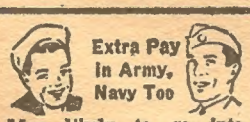

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WET MAGIC

By Henry Kuttner

● It wasn't his intention to meet Merlin, nor Lady Vivienne—and least of all Morgan le Fay. But it was trying so desperately to get away from Morgan and her lake that finally led him to stalk her to her own room—

Illustrated by Kolliker

It happened in Wales, which, of course, was the logical place for Morgan le Fay to be. Not that Arthur Woodley expected to find the fabled enchantress there, of course. He was looking for something entirely different. In a word, safety.

With two Stukas hanging doggedly on the tail of his observation plane, despite the pea-soup fog that shrouded the craggy peaks of Wales, Woodley dodged and twisted frantically, his hard, handsome face set in lines of strain. It wasn't fair, he thought. This crate wasn't meant as a fighter, and needed another crewman anyway. Nazis weren't supposed to butt in on routine transfer flights.

Z-zoom!

Tracer bullets fanned Woodley's helmet. Why wouldn't those Stukas leave him alone? He hadn't been looking for them. If he had thought to find enemy aircraft in Wales, he'd have flown rapidly in the opposite direction. *Zoom* again. No use. The Stukas hung on. Woodley dived dangerously into the fog.

Damn—Hollywood arranged things better. Woodley grinned mirthlessly. In the air battles he'd starred in in Paradox's *"Flight Wings,"* he had the proper kind of a plane to work in. Say a Spitfire or a P-38. And—

Tut-tut-tut! Double-damn! This couldn't keep up much longer. Those Stukas were becoming familiar with all of Woodley's tricks—the *spang!* each slug made as it struck armor plate unpleasantly reminded him that these were not Hollywood blanks.

Tut-tut-tut-spang! He would have engaged one. Two of them made the odds unnecessarily heavy. Also, in this thick fog, it shouldn't be too difficult to escape—

The engine coughed and died. A bullet had found the fuel line, presumably. Woodley almost felt relieved. He banked the plane into an especially dense bank of fog, glanced back, and saw the Stukas following relentlessly. How far down was the ground?

He had to risk it, in any case. As he bailed out, some bullets screamed past, but none found a mark

in Woodley's body. The fog was denser lower down, and camouflaged the parachute so that there was no more gunfire.

The plane crashed, some distance away. The drone of the Stukas grew fainter as the Nazi planes circled away to the east, their job done. Woodley, swaying in the silk shrouds, peered down, straining his eyes to see what lay below.

A tree. He caromed off a branch, in a tremendous crackling and thumping, brought up with a terrific jolt, and hung breathless, slowly revolving. The silence of the fog closed in again. He could hear nothing but the low murmur of a rivulet somewhere in that blanketing grayness.

Woodley slipped out of his harness, climbed down, and drank brandy from a pocket flask before he looked around.

There was little to see. The fog was still thick, though he could make out the silhouettes of ghostly trees all around him. A forest, then. From where he stood, the ground sloped sharply down to where the unseen streamlets gurgled.

The brandy had made him thirsty for water, so Woodley stumbled through the murk till he almost fell into the stream. He drank, and then, shivering with cold, examined his surroundings more carefully.

Not far away grew an immense oak, gnarled and ancient, with a trunk as large as that of a California sequoia. Its exposed roots, where erosion had done its work, made a comfortable-looking burrow—or, rather cave; and at least it would provide shelter from the knifing wind. Woodley went forward warily and assured himself that the little den was empty. Fair enough.

He got down on all fours and backed into the hollow. Not far. Something kicked him in the pants, and Woodley described an arc that ended with his head in the brook. He bubbled a yell and sprang up, blinking icy water from his eyes. A bear—

There was no bear. Woodley remembered that he had scrutinized the cave of roots carefully, and he was certain it could have contained nothing larger than a fairly young mouse. And mice seldom, if ever, kick with noticeable effect.

It was curiosity that drew Woodley back to the scene of his humiliation. He peered in furtively. Nothing. Nothing at all. A springy root must have snapped back and struck him. It couldn't happen twice. Moreover, the wind was growing colder.

This time Woodley crawled in headfirst, and this time he was kicked in the face.

Rising rapidly from the brook, Woodley thought wildly of invisible kangaroos. He stood motionless, staring at that notably empty cave of roots. Then he drank brandy.

Logic came to his aid. He had been through an unpleasant nervous ordeal. Little wonder that he was imagining things now. Nevertheless, he did not make a third attempt to invade the burrow. Instead, he went rather hastily downstream. The watercourse should lead somewhere.

The parachute descent into the tree had bruised him a bit, so presently Woodley sat down to rest. The swirling gray fog made him slightly dizzy. The dark column of the trees seemed to move with a wavering, half-animate life of their own. Woodley lay back, closing his eyes. He didn't like Wales. He didn't like this mess he was in. He—

Someone kissed him full on the lips.

Automatically Woodley responded before he realized what was happening. Then he opened his eyes to see a slim, lovely girl rising from where she had knelt beside him. He had not heard her approach—

"Well—" he said. "Hello!" The girl was singularly beautiful, dark-haired, with a fillet of gold about her brow. She wore a robe that reached her ankles, but Woodley could see that her figure was eminently satisfactory.

"You smell of Merlin," she said.

"I . . . uh . . . I do?" murmured Woodley, feeling vaguely insulted. He got up, staring. Curious costumes they wore in this part of the country. Maybe—*yipe!*—maybe he wasn't even in England!

He asked the girl about that, and she shook her head. "This is Wales." There was a puzzled frown drawing together the dark line of her brows. "Who are you? You remind me of . . . someone—"

"Arthur Woodley. I'm flying for the A. E. F. You must have seen some of my pictures—eh?"

"Merlin could fly," she remarked cryptically.

Baffled, Woodley suddenly recollected that a Merlin was a bird—a sort of falcon, he thought. That explained it. "I didn't see you come up," he said. "You live near here?"

The girl chuckled softly. "Oh, I'm usually invisible. No one can see me or touch me unless I want them to. And my name is Vivienne."

"It's a lovely name," Woodley said, automatically going into his routine. "It suits you."

Vivienne said, "Not for years have I felt passion for any man. Is it because you remind me of Merlin? I think I love you, Arthur."

Woodley swallowed. Curious customs they had in Wales! But he'd have to be careful not to insult the girl—after all he was lost, and her services as a guide would be invaluable.

There was no need to speak. Vivienne went on swiftly.

"I live not far from here. Under the lake. My home and I are yours. Provided you pass the testing, of course. But, since you can fly, you will not be afraid of any task Morgan may set you —so?"

"Why—" Woodley hesitated, and then glanced

around him at the chilly grayness of the fog. "Why, I'd love to go with you, Vivienne," he amplified hastily. "I . . . I suppose you live with your parents?"

"They have long been dust. Do you come with me of your own free will?"

"It's a pleasure."

"Say it—your own free will," Vivienne insisted, her dark eyes glowing.

Woodley complied, definitely puzzled, but willing to play along, since it obviously could do no harm. The girl smiled like an angel. "Now you are mine," she said. "Or you will be, when you have passed Morgan's testing. Come! It is not far, but—shall we fly?"

"Why not?" Woodley countered, grinning. "Let's go."

Vivienne obeyed. She lifted her arms, stood on tiptoe, and rose gently from the ground, swaying slightly in the breeze. Woodley remained perfectly motionless, looking at the spot where she had been.

Then he started violently, cast a quick glance around, and finally, with the utmost reluctance, tilted back his head.

There she was, floating down the gorge, looking back over her shoulder. "This way!" her silvery voice came back.

Automatically Woodley turned around and began to walk away. His eyes were slightly glazed. He was brooding over hallucinations—

"My love!" a voice cried from above.

There was a *swoosh* in the air behind him, reminding Woodley of a Stuka. He whirled, trying to dodge, and fell headlong into the stream. His temple thumped solidly against a rounded stone—and unconsciousness was definitely a relief.

He was back in his Bel-Air home, Woodley thought, waking up between silk sheets, with an ice pack on his head. The ice pack was refreshing, almost eliminating a dull, throbbing ache. A hangover—

He remembered. It wasn't a hangover. He had fallen, and struck his head. But what had happened before that? Vivienne . . . *oh!* With a sickish feeling in his middle, Woodley recalled her words, and they had assumed a new and shocking significance.

But it couldn't be true—

His eyelids snapped open. He was in bed, yes; but it wasn't his bed, and he was looking up into the face of a . . . thing.

Superficially she was a girl, unadorned, and with a singularly excellent figure. But she was made of green jello. Her unbound hair looked like very fine seaweed, and floated in a cloud about her head. She drew back at Woodley's movement, withdrawing her hand—which the man had mistaken for an ice pack.

"My lord," she said, bowing low.

"Dream," Woodley muttered incoherently. "Must be. Wake up pretty soon. Green jello . . . technicolor—" He tapered off vaguely, looking around. He was between sheets of finest silk; the room itself had no windows, but a cool, colorless radiance filled it. The air was quite clear, yet it seemed to have—thickened. Woodley could trace the tiny currents in it, and the swirls as he sat up. The sheets fell away from his bare torso.

"D-dream," said Woodley, not believing it for a moment.

"My lord," said the green maiden, bowing again. Her voice was sweet and rather bubbly. "I am Nurmala, a naiad, here to serve you."

Woodley experimentally pinched himself. It hurt. He reached out to seize Nurmala's arm, and a horrifying thing happened. The naiad girl not only looked like jelly—she *was* jelly. It felt like squeezing a sack filled with cold mush. Cold and loathsome.

"The Lady Vivienne ordered me to watch over you," Nurmala said, apparently unhurt. Her arm had resumed its normal contour. Woodley noticed that she seemed to waver around the edges as she went on, "Before sundown you must pass the testing Morgan le Fay has set you, and you will need all your mettle to do that."

"What?" Woodley didn't quite comprehend.

"You must slay that which lairs behind Shaking Rock," Nurmala said. "Morgan—made it—this morning, and placed it there, for your testing. I swam out and saw—" She caught herself, with a quick glance around, and said swiftly, "But how can I serve you, lord?"

Woodley rubbed his eyes. "I . . . am I dreaming? Well, I want some clothes. And where am I?"

Nurmala went away, seeming to glide rather than walk, and returned with a bundle of garments, which Woodley took and examined. There was a knee-length blue samite tunic, with gold bands of embroidery upon it, linen drawers, long fawn-colored hose with leather soles, and a belt with a dagger in its sheath attached. On the bosom of the tunic was a design of a coiled snake with a golden star above its upraised, threatening head.

"Will you don them, lord? You are not dreaming—no."

Woodley had already realized that. He was certainly awake, and his surroundings were quite as certainly—unearthly. The conclusions were obvious.

Meanwhile, he'd feel better with pants on. "Sure," he said. "I'll don them." Then he waited. Nurmala also waited, cocking her head to one side in an interested way. Finally Woodley gave up, dragged the drawers under the sheets, and struggled into them in that position with some diffi-

culty. Nurmala seemed disappointed, but said nothing.

So Vivienne's words had been literally true! Good Lord, what a spot! Still—Woodley's eyes narrowed speculatively as he adjusted his tunic. Once you took the initial improbable premise for granted, you were far safer. Magic—*hm-m-m*. In folklore and legends, humans had generally come off second best in encounters with fairy folk. The reason seemed fairly obvious. A producer could usually outbluff a Hollywood actor. The actor felt —was made to feel—his limitations. And supernatural beings, Woodley thought, had a habit of depending to a great extent on their unearthly background. It was sound psychology. Get the other fellow worried, and the battle is more than half won.

But if the other fellow didn't bluff—if he kept his feet solidly on the ground, and used his head —the results should be different. Woodley hoped so. What had Vivienne—and Nurmala, the naiad —said about a testing? It sounded dangerous.

He held out his hand. Quite steady. And, now that he was dressed, Woodley felt more confident.

"Where's a mirror?" he asked. Concentration on such down-to-earth details would help his mental attitude—

"Our queen mislikes them," the naiad murmured. "There are none beneath the lake. But you cut a gallant figure, lord."

"Lake? Queen? You mean Vivienne?"

"Oh, no," said Nurmala, rather shocked. "Our queen is Morgan le Fay." She touched the embroidered snake design on Woodley's breast with a translucent forefinger. "The Queen of Air and Darkness. She rules, of course, and we all serve her—even the Lady Vivienne, who is high in favor."

Morgan le Fay. Remembrance came to Woodley. He had a kaleidoscopic picture of knights in armor, distressed maidens shut up in towers, the Round Table, Launcelot and Arthur—Vivienne! Didn't the legend say that Vivienne was the girl with whom the wizard Merlin had fallen in love?

And Morgan le Fay was the evil genius of the Arthurian cycle, the enchantress who hated the king, her half-brother, so bitterly—

"Look," Woodley said. "Just how—"

"I hight Bohart!"

The words didn't make sense. But they came from someone who, at least, looked human, despite his costume, almost a duplicate of Woodley's. The man stood before a curtain that billowed with his passing, and his ruddy, long mustache bristled with fury. Over his tunic he wore a gleaming metal cuirass, and in his hand was a bare sword.

Nurmala bubbled faintly and retreated with a swish. "My lord Bohart—"

"Silence, naiad!" the other thundered, glaring at Woodley. "I name you knave, lackey, lick-spittle, and traitor! Yes, you!"

Woodley looked helplessly at Nurmala. "It is Sir Bohart," she said unhappily. "The Lady Vivienne will be furious."

But it was the obvious fury of Sir Bohart himself that worried Woodley—that, and the sharp-edged sword. If—

"Draw!" the knight roared.

Nurmala interposed a tremulous objection. "He has no sword. It is not meet—"

Sir Bohart gobbled into his mustache and cast his blade away. From his belt he whipped a dagger that was the counterpart of Woodley's. "We are even now," he said, with horrid satisfaction. "Well?"

"Say you yield," Normala whispered. "Quick!"

"I yield," Woodley repeated obediently. The knight was not pleased.

"Knave! To yield without a struggle— Ha! Are you a knight?"

"No," Woodley said before he thought, and Nurmala gasped in horror.

"My lord! No knight? But Sir Bohart can slay you now without dishonor!"

Bohart was moving forward, his dagger glittering, a pleased smile on his scarred face. "She speaks sooth. Now shall I slit your weasand."

It sounded unpleasant. Woodley hastily put the bed between himself and the advancing knight. "Now wait a minute," he said firmly. "I don't even know who you are. Why should we fight?"

Sir Bohart had not paused. "Craven dog! You take the Lady Vivienne from me, and then seek to placate me. No!"

They circled the bed, while the naiad bubbled a faint scream and fled. Robbed of even that slight moral support, Woodley felt his knees weaken. "I didn't take Vivienne," he urged. "I only just met her."

Sir Bohart said, between his teeth, "For centuries I have dwelt here beneath the lake, since Arthur fell at Salisbury Plain. The Lady Vivienne loved me then—and in a hundred years I bored her. She turned to the study of goety. But I have been faithful, knowing always that some time I would win her back. Without a rival, I was sure of it. Now you have come to lure her from me—lackey cur! Ah-h!" The dagger's sweep ripped cloth from Woodley's sleeve as he nimbly dodged and caught up a metal vase from a tabouret. He hurled it at Bohart's head. The vase bounced back without touching the knight.

More magic, apparently.

"Maybe I am dreaming, after all," Woodley groaned, jumping back.

"I thought that myself, for a while," Bohart said conversationally, leaping across the bed and slashing out with his weapon. "Later, I knew I was not. Will you draw?"

Woodley unsheathed his dagger. He ducked under Sir Bohart's thrust and slashed up at the knight's arm. It was like striking at glass. His point slid off harmlessly, and only by a frantic writhe was he able to avoid being impaled.

How the devil could he fight against this sort of magic?

"Look," he said, "I don't want Vivienne."

"You dare to insult my lady," the knight bellowed, crimson-faced, as he plunged forward. "By the spiked tail of Sathanas, I'll—"

"Sir Bohart!" It was Vivienne's voice, iron under the velvet. She was standing at the curtain, Nurmala quivering behind her. "Hold!"

"Nay, nay," Bohart puffed. "This knave is not fit for black beetles to eat. Have no fear for me; I can slay him easily."

"And I promise to slay you if you harm him, despite your magic cuirass that can turn all blows!" Vivienne shrilled. "Let be, I say! Let be! Else—"

Sir Bohart hesitated, sending a wary glance at the girl. He looked toward the shrinking Woodley and snarled silently.

Vivienne said, "Must I summon Morgan?"

The knight's face went gray as weathered stone. He swung around, a sick horror in his eyes.

"My lady—" he said.

"I have protected you till now, for old time's sake. Often the queen has wanted a partner to play at chess—and often she has asked me for you. In truth, there are few humans beneath the lake, and I would be sorry to lose your company, Bohart. But Morgan has not played at chess for long and long."

The knight slowly sheathed his dagger. He licked his lips. Silently he went to the hanging drapery, passed through, and was gone

"Perhaps Bleys should bleed him," Nurmala suggested. "Sir Bohart grows more choleric each day."

Vivienne had lost her angry look. She smiled mockingly at the green girl.

"So you can get the blood, eh? You naiads. You'd strip yourself clean for a drop of human blood, if you weren't stripped already." Her voice changed. "Go now. My new gown must be ready, for we sup with Morgan le Fay tonight after the testing."

As Nurmala vanished, Vivienne came forward and put her arms around Woodley's neck. "I am sorry for this, messire. Sir Bohart will not offend again. He is fiercely jealous—but I never loved him. For a little time I amused myself, some centuries ago—that was all. It is you I love, my Arthur, you alone."

"Look," Woodley said, "I'd like a little information. Where am I, for one thing?"

"But do you not know?" Vivienne looked puzzled. "When you said you could fly, I felt sure you were at least a wizard. Yet when I brought you here, I found you could not breathe under water—I had to ask Morgan to change you."

"Change me?" Instinctively Woodley fingered his throat.

The girl laughed softly. "You have no gills. Morgan's magic works more subtly. You have been—altered—so that you can live under water. The element is as air to you. It is the same enchantment Morgan put upon this castle when she sank it in the lake, after Camelot fell and the long night came upon Britain. An old enchantment—she put it upon Lyonesse once, and lived there for a while."

"And I thought all that was just legend," Woodley muttered.

"How little you mortals know! And yet it is true—in some strange paradoxical way. Morgan told me once, but I did not understand. Well, you can ask her tonight, after the testing."

"Oh—the testing. I'm not too happy about that. What is it, anyway?"

Vivienne looked a him with some surprise. "An ancient chivalric custom. Before any man can dwell here, he must prove himself worthy by doing some deed of valor. Sir Bohart had to slay a Worm—a dragon, you know—but his magic cuirass helped him there. He's quite invulnerable while he wears it."

"Just what is this testing?"

"It is different for each knight. Morgan has made some being, with her sorcery, and placed it behind the Shaking Rock. Ere sundown, you must go and kill the creature, whatever it is. I would I knew what manner of thing lairs there, but I do not, nor would Morgan let me tell you if I knew."

Woodley blinked. "Uh . . . suppose I don't want to take the test?"

"You must, or Morgan will slay you. But surely you are not afeared, my lord!"

"Of course not," he said hastily. "Just tell me a little more, will you? Are we really living under water?"

Vivienne sighed, pressed Woodley down to a sitting position on the bed, and relaxed comfortably in his lap. "Kiss me," she said. "There! Now—well, after the Grail was lost and the table broken, magic went out of Britain. There was no room for the fairy folk. Some died, some went away, some hid, here and there. There are secrets beneath the hills of Britain, my Arthur. So Morgan, with her powers, made herself invisible and intangible, and sank her castle here under the lake, in the wild mountains of Wales. Her servants are not human, of course. I had done Morgan a service once, and she was grateful. So when I saw the land sinking into savagery, I asked to go with her to this safe place. I brought Bohart with me,

and Morgan took Merlin's old master, Bleys the Druid. Since then nothing has changed. Humans cannot feel or see us—or you either, now that you have been enchanted."

"Merlin?" Woodley was remembering the legend. "Didn't you shut him up in an oak—" He stopped, realizing that he had made a *faux pas*. But it was so damnably hard to realize that legend had become real!"

Vivienne's face changed. "I loved him," she said, and her lips pinched together. "We will not speak of that!"

Woodley was thinking hard. Apparently he *was* breathing water, though he didn't notice any difficulty with his lungs. Yet there was an extraordinary—*thickness*—to the atmosphere, and a glassy, pellucid clarity. Moreover, the angles of refraction were subtly alien. It was true, then.

"So I'm living in a legend."

She smiled. "It was real for all that, in a way. I remember. Such scandals we had in Camelot! I recall once Launcelot rescued a girl named Elaine, who'd been shut up in a boiling bath in a tower for years and years—she said. I got the truth of it later. It was all over the court. Elaine was married to an old knight—a *very* old knight—and when she heard Launcelot was in town, she decided to hook *him*. So she sent her page to Launcelot with a cock-and-bull story about a curse—said her husband wasn't her husband at all, but a wicked magician—and had a bath all ready in the tower, for the right moment. When Launcelot broke down the door, she hopped into the tub, naked as a needle, and yelled like the Questing Beast. It hurt, certes, but Elaine didn't mind that. Especially when her husband rushed in. She pointed at him and cried, 'The wizard!' So Launcelot drew his sword and made Elaine a widow. Not that it did her any good, with Guenevere in Camelot waiting for her lover. Though Guenevere had reason for behaving as she did, *I* think. The way Arthur behaved with Morgawse! Of course that was before he married, but just the same—

"Legends, indeed," went on Vivienne. "I know legends! I suppose they gloss over the truth nowadays. Well, I could tell them a thing or two! I'll wager they've even made a hero out of that notorious old rake Lot. *He* certainly got what was coming to him. Indeed yes! But bad blood tells, I always feel. There was King Anguish, with his hunting lodge in the forest, and his unicorn hunts. Oh, yes!

"Unicorn hunts, forsooth," said Vivienne. "It's true you need a virgin to lure the unicorn, but there weren't many horns Anguish of Ireland brought home, I can tell you! And look at his daughter Yseult! She was her father all over again. She and Tristran—a minstrel! Everybody knows about minstrels. True enough, Yseult's husband wasn't any Galahad. Not Mark! For that matter, let me tell you about Galahad. It wasn't only the bar that was sinister about *him*. They say that over in Bedigraine Forest one hot summer—"

Nurmala's bubbling voice interrupted. The naiad stood by the drape that masked the door.

"My lady, I have done all that I can to the gown without you. But it must be fitted."

"Lackaday!" said Vivienne, rising. "I'll tell you about Uther and that widow some other time. Ten children, mind! Well, you need not go to the Shaking Rock till after midday meal, so would you like to view the castle?"

"Now wait a minute!" Woodley was beginning to feel anxious. "About this testing, Vivienne—"

"It is simple. You gird on a sword, go to the Shaking Rock—someone will guide you—and slay whatever creature Morgan has created there. Then you come back to sup."

"Just like that, eh?" Woodley said, with rather feeble irony. "But how do I know a sword will kill the thing? Suppose it's a dragon?"

Nurmala gave a quickly suppressed giggle. Woodley glanced at the naiad, remembering something she had let drop earlier. What was it? Nurmala had begun to say that she had swum out and seen—

The creature behind the Shaking Rock? Woodley's eyes widened. He could make use of the naiad!

Not yet, of course. There was still plenty of time. It would be better to familiarize himself with the aqueous life of the castle first.

Vivienne said, "Shall I have Bleys show you around?"

Bleys? The Druid wizard—not a bad idea. He might be a valuable source of information, and perhaps something more. If one could use magic to fight magic—

Not that Woodley had any intention of visiting the Shaking Rock, he pondered. At the first opportunity, he was getting out of this place. He could swim. If Bleys would show him the front door, he'd show Bleys a clean pair of heels.

"Fine," Woodley said. "Let's go."

Vivienne swept to the door. "Nurmala will take you to Bleys. Do not linger, naiad. That gown must be finished—"

She was gone. Woodley waited till the sound of soft footfalls had died. Nurmala was eying him curiously.

"My lord—"

He stopped her with an outthrust arm and closed the door with the other. "Just a minute. I want to talk to you."

The naiad's green jello face became slightly tinged with blue. She was blushing, Woodley surmised, and gulped. He went on swiftly:

"I want you to tell me what's behind the Shaking Rock."

Nurmala looked away. "How can I do that? Only Morgan knows."

"You swam out there this morning, didn't you? I thought so. Well, I'm not blaming you for curiosity, especially since I need the information. Come on, now. Give. What is it? A dragon?" he hazarded.

The naiad shivered around the edges. "Nay, my lord, I dare not say. If Morgan were to find out—"

"She won't."

"I cannot tell you!"

Woodley took out his dagger and touched the point to his arm. Nurmala watched with suddenly avid eyes.

"Vivienne said naiads were crazy about human blood. Like vampires, eh? Even for a drop or two—"

"No! No! I dare not—"

Woodley pricked his finger—

"Well," said Nurmala some time later, "it's this way. Morgan le Fay created an undine and placed it behind the Shaking Rock."

"What's an undine?"

"It's about fifteen feet long, and—like hair," the naiad explained, licking her lips.

"Like hair?"

"You can't see its body, which is very small. It's covered with long hairy filaments that burn like fire when they touch you."

"I see," Woodley nodded grimly. "A super-Portuguese man-of-war. Electric jellyfish. Nice thing to fight with a sword!"

"It is a demon," Nurmala agreed. "But you will slay it easily."

"Oh, sure. Any idea how?"

"I fear not. I can tell you how to find it, though. Take the root of a mandrake and squeeze out the juice. That will bring the undine posthaste, if it tries to hide from you."

"Catnip," Woodley said cryptically. "Well, at least I know what the thing is."

"You will not tell Morgan I told you? You promised!"

"I won't tell her. . . . *Hm-m-m!* I wonder if—"

Nurmala jumped. "I have kept the Lady Vivienne waiting. Come, now, my lord. Quickly!"

Woodley thoughtfully followed the naiad into a tapestried hall, and along it to a carved door, which Nurmala pushed open. "Bleys!" she called.

"Bip!"

"Drunken oaf of a Druid," the naiad said impatiently. "There is a task for you."

"Has the dragon's fire gone out again?" a squeaky voice asked, rather plaintively. "By Mider, a salamander would be more dependable. But I suppose the water keeps putting the fire out. I keep telling the dragon not to take such deep breaths. *Bip!*"

"This is Messire Arthur of Woodley. Show him the castle. He is the Lady Vivienne's lover," Nurmala added as an afterthought, and Woodley blushed hotly.

It was very dark in the chamber. Sea spiders had spun webs all around, and it looked very much like an ancient alchemist's chamber, which it was. There were stacks of heavy tomes, a crucible or two, several alembics, a stuffed crocodile, and Bleys.

Bleys was a withered little gnome of a man, wispy enough to be blown away by a vagrant gust of wind. His dirty white beard hung in the aqueous atmosphere like a veil before his wrinkled

brown walnut of a face. Bleys wore a long mud-colored robe with a peaked hood, and he sat cross-legged, an earthenware jug in his skinny hands.

"Messire Arthur of Woodley," Bleys squeaked. "Greeting. *Bip!*" He drank from the jug. "*Bip!* again."

Woodley said at random, "You've . . . uh . . . got a nice place here." It would be wise to make friends with the Druid, as a first step in enlisting his aid.

Bleys waved casually at the alembics and retorts. "Those. Used to do all sorts of magic with 'em. Philosopher's Stone—*you* know. But not now. I just make liquor. *Bip!*"

"Liquor?"

"All sorts. Mead, wine—all by magic, of course. Real liquor wouldn't last long under water—*you* know. *Bip!* I haven't been drunk since I came down here with Morgan. Magic ale hasn't got the kick of the real stuff. *Eheu!*"

"Bleys," Nurmala murmured.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes." The wizard peered blearily through his beard. "Vivienne wants me to show you around. Not worth it. Dull place, the castle. How'd you like to stay here with me instead and have a few drinks?"

As Woodley hesitated, the naiad said, "I'll tell the Lady Vivienne, Bleys."

"Oh, all right." The Druid stiffly rose and moved unsteadily forward. "Come along, then, Messire Arthur. Arthur . . . Arthur?" He squinted up sharply at Woodley's face. "For a moment I thought . . . but you're not Pendragon. There was a prophecy, you know, that he'd come again. Get along with you, Nurmala, or I'll turn you into a polliwog and step on you."

"You'll show Messire Arthur the castle, now?"

"Yes, yes," Bleys said snappishly. As Nurmala rippled away, he made an angry sound in his beard. "They all kick me around. Even the damned naiads. But why not?" He drank from the jug. "I'm just an old has-been. Me, who taught Merlin all he knew. They hate me because I won't work magic for them. Why should I? I make this instead. Have a drink. "No," he added hastily, drawing back. "You can't have any. I made it, and it's mine. Not that it'll get me drunk! Magic ale, forsooth! Sometimes I wish I were dead. *Bip!*"

He headed for the door, Woodley at his heels. "What do you want to see first?"

"I don't know. There'll be plenty of time to look around after I pass the testing. You know about that, don't you?"

Bleys nodded. "Oh, yes. But I don't know what sort of creature Morgan put behind the Shaking Rock." He glanced up shrewdly. "Before you go on—I can't help you. I can't give you any magic, because the queen won't let me, and I've no valuable information you'd be glad to hear. The only thing I have to give is a sword, and I'm holding that for—one who will come later." His voice had changed oddly. "You must meet the testing with true courage, and that will be your shield."

"Thanks," Woodley said, his lips twisting wryly. No information, eh? Well, Bleys must know how to get out of the castle. Yet that secret must be wormed out of him subtly. He couldn't ask point-blank—

"Well," the Druid said, guiding Woodley along the hall, "the place is built in a hollow square, around the courtyard in the middle. No windows. The fishes are worse than mosquitoes. Snatch the food out of your hands. We keep the dragon in the courtyard. Scavenger. He takes care of the garbage problem. *Bip!*"

Vague memories of museums stirred in Woodley. "I don't see any suits of armor."

"Think you'll need one?" Bleys cackled unpleasantly. "They're in the armory." He toddled unsteadily on with a certain grim fortitude. "This isn't Joyouse Garde or the Castle of the Burning Hart. Environment's different. No pots of lead for melting on our towers. We can't be besieged. For that matter, the whole design of a castle is functional, quite useless under the lake."

"Why don't things get wet?"

"Same reason the water seems like air. Wet magic. That type of enchantment was perfected in Atlantis—it's beyond me, but I'm a Druid. We work with fire mostly. Oak, ash, and thorn," Bleys reminisced. "When I was a boy at Stonehenge . . . oh, well. *Sic transit*—you know. *Bip.* Mider curse this ale—it's like dish water. How I've longed for a sippet of dry-land liquor! But of course I can't live out of water now. What are you looking at? Oh, that. Recognize the scene?" The Druid tittered unpleasantly.

Woodley was examining a great tapestry that covered one wall of the room they had just entered. Faded and ancient, but still brilliantly colored, it was covered with scenes that evoked a familiar note. A man and a woman—a tree—a snake—and, in the background, another woman who was strikingly beautiful even through this medium.

"Lilith," Bleys said. "The castle's full of tapestries. They show legends, battles, sieges—*you* know." He peered through the veil of his floating beard. "*Ars longa*—but the rest of the tag isn't exactly appropriate, eh? *Bip!*"

"Come along," he added, and tugged at his guest's arm.

It was not a leisurely tour of the castle. Bleys was impatient, and willing to pause only when he wanted a drink. Woodley was towed about willy-nilly, seldom catching a clear glimpse of anything.

But he managed to form some sort of picture of the place.

Built three stories high around a central courtyard, the castle came to a climax in the enormous donjon keep whose great square height dominated one angle of the building. Across the court from it was a barbican—two huge towers with the gateway recessed between them, guarded by a lowered portcullis through which an occasional fish swam lazily, and a futilely lifted drawbridge that had once spanned a vanished moat. Woodley saw this from the tower of the keep—the first time he had emerged from within the castle itself. And the ground was unpleasantly far down.

The lake bottom, rather. What he wanted to find was a door—an exit!

Water was like air to him, Woodley remembered. So a jump from the top of the keep would mean, in all probability, breaking his neck.

"Come on," said Bleys impatiently. "Let's go down."

There were great bare halls with galleries, there were storerooms and kitchens and barracks and dormitories. The smaller apartments were few. They passed a cobwebby still room where sea spiders had veiled loaded shelves behind wavering curtains of web. Bleys remarked that Morgan le Fay once amused herself by distilling potions and poisons, but she never used such clumsy devices nowadays.

An idea was beginning to stir in Woodley's mind. He asked questions.

"That? An alembic. That? Staghorn with gum Arabic. For childbirth, mostly. That jar's got dried bedbugs in it. Mastic, snakeroot, fennel, mandrake, musk, medlar tree bark—"

Mandrake. Remembering what Nurmala had told him, Woodley edged closer.

"And that thing over there?"

"That's a Witch's Cradle. It's used—"

Woodley deftly annexed the mandrake, slipping it into his tunic. So far, so good. All that now remained was to work out a method of using the root effectively. If only undines were afraid of mandrake, instead of being attracted to it! Well, if worse came to worst, he might distract the monster's attention with the root, somehow, while he made his escape—

"Come along. *Bip.*"

Presently they were on a little balcony overlooking the courtyard. "There's the dragon," Bleys said. "Draedan. It's an Anglo-Saxon name, and Anglo-Saxon was unpopular in our day—but so were dragons. See all that rubbish?"

There were amorphous ruins rising from the silt at the edge of the courtyard, and a larger mound in the center.

"Stables, falcon mews, cattle barns, a chapel—once. Not that anybody ever worshiped in *that* chapel. Morgan—*you* know. Air and Darkness. *Bip!*" Bleys stared reflectively into his jug. "Come along."

"Wait," Woodley said rebelliously. "I want to look at the dragon." Actually, he was hoping to find an exit from this vantage point.

"Oh, Draedan. That worm. Very well." The Druid slipped down to a sitting position and closed his eyes. *"Bip."*

Woodley's gaze was inevitably drawn to the dragon—a truly startling spectacle. It looked vaguely like a stegosaurus, with waving hackles on its arched back, and a long, spiked tail with a knob at the end. The head, however, was not the tiny one of a herbivorous dinosaur. It was a mixture of crocodile and tyrannosaur rex, three horns atop the nose, and a cavernous mouth as large as a subway kiosk. It was as long as two streetcars, and twice as high. Glowing yellow eyes glared lambently. A gush of flame shot out from the horror's mouth as Draedan breathed.

Just then, the grimly monster was eating garbage, in a somewhat finicky fashion.

Woodley wondered how its fiery breath could burn under water, and then remembered Morgan's magic. If he could improvise a flame thrower to use against the undine—but how? He watched a gush of bubbles drift up each time the flame rippled out. Hordes of little fishes were trying to swipe Draedan's dinner.

Clumsy on its columnar legs, the dragon would retaliate by breathing heavily upon its tormentors, who fled from the fire. Bleys woke up to say, "That creature's got its troubles. It hates cooked food, but by the time it chases those fish off, all the garbage is well roasted. I'd put its flame out for good, but a dragon needs fire in its stomach to digest its food. Something to do with metabolism. Wish I could put out the fire in *my* stomach," he added, and, after drinking from the jug and bipping reflectively, went to sleep again.

Woodley leaned upon the balcony and examined the dragon with fascinated horror. The slow movements of the saurian—all dragons are saurians—gave it a peculiarly nightmare appearance. It looked like a Hollywood technician's creation, rather badly done, and far from convincing.

At that moment, someone seized Woodley about the knees, lifted him, and hurled him bodily over the balcony.

He fell with a thud in cushioning soft ooze. A cloud of silt billowed up as Woodley sprang to his feet. Not a yard from his nose, a lake trout hung suspended with waving motions of its fins, eying him thoughtfully. Other fish, attracted by the commotion, swam toward Woodley, whose heart had prolapsed into his sandals.

As the silt-cloud cleared, Draedan became visi-

ble. The dragon had turned his head to stare straight at Woodley.

Draeden yawned fierily.

He lifted one tree-trunk leg and began to move ponderously forward.

"Bleys!" Woodley roared. *"Bleys! Help!"*

There was no answer—not even a bip. "Bleys! *Wake up!"*

Then he ran. There was a closed door in the wall near Woodley, and he fled toward it. Draedan was not far behind, but the saurian moved slowly and clumsily.

"Bleys!"

The door was locked, quite firmly, from the inside. Woodley groaned and dodged as Draedan lumbered on, resistless as an army tank.

"Bleys!"

There was another door across the courtyard. Woodley sprinted toward it. He could hear lumbering footsteps behind him.

But this door, too, was locked.

Flattened against it, Woodley looked back with narrowed, calculating eyes. A trail of silt hung wavering in the water to mark his trail. Through it Draedan came, yellow eyes shining like fog lamps, flame bursting from his mouth.

"Bleys! Wake up!"

Still no response. Springing away, Woodley tripped over a stone buried in the mud, and a cloud of ooze leaped up around him. As he hastily rose, an idea flashed into his mind.

A smoke screen—

He ran, scuffing his feet. Silt billowed up. Draedan's behemothic progress helped, too. Yelling occasionally at Bleys, Woodley circled the courtyard and then crossed his own trail, stirring up a murky barrage. Within a few minutes the water was as opaque as pea soup.

Yet Draedan did not give up. His feet thumped on, and his glowing disks of eyes swam out of the dimness with horrifying frequency. Woodley was too winded now to shout. But if he could keep on dodging long enough—Draedan could not possibly see him now—

The dragon had other ideas. Abruptly a long tongue of flame flashed out murkily. Almost immediately it came again. Woodley ran.

Draedan breathed heavily. Fire trails lanced through the silt fog. Apparently the dragon had realized that there was more than one way of skinning a cat—or getting his dinner. Once one of those fiery gusts found him, Woodley knew, he would be reduced to cinders. It was ridiculous to be incinerated under water, he thought moodily as he sped on his frantic way.

The silt particles made him cough. He crashed against the grilled metal of the barbican and hung there, gasping. Iron, rusty and weak, bent under his weight, leaving a gap in the barrier.

Draedan's headlight eyes glowed out of the murk. With grim desperation Woodley wrenched at more bars. They, too, were fragile and corroded, and came away easily. As the dragon charged, Woodley dived head first through the hole he had made in the barbican. Flame singed his drawers.

He seemed, however, to be still cornered. The drawbridge was raised, and hung like a slightly slanted wall above him. But the difficulty was only an apparent one, as Woodley found when he slipped sidewise past the edge of the bridge. He was in the open, outside the wall—and there was no moat to keep him from escaping.

He was on the lake bottom. Behind him and above, the castle of Morgan le Fay rose like a crag. It was no longer a prison—

Woodley listened. Draedan had apparently given up the chase. And Bleys was presumably still asleep. Best of all, the way to freedom was open. That tumble into the courtyard had been a blessing in disguise.

Well—fair enough! Woodley sighed with relief. He would not have to face that unpleasant testing involving the undine. Instead, he hurried away from the castle.

Rounded stones felt hard through the leather soles of his hose. The ground slanted up sharply. And, as he went on, he realized that the lake was, as well as he could tell, bowl-shaped, and very deep. The castle was in the deepest part.

He wondered where the Shaking Rock lay. Not that he wanted to go there—now!

Briefly he found himself regretting Vivienne, who had been quite lovely. Her face in his mind was vivid, but not enticing enough to slow down his steady climb. He went through a forest of water weeds—no great hindrance—and was trailed by a school of inquisitive minnows. From above, a cool blue light drifted down.

Higher he went, and higher. Far above, he could see a flat shining plate—a bright sky rimmed by a circular horizon. It was the surface.

His head was almost above water now. He could see a rocky shore, and trees—oddly distorted, with fantastic perspective. A water bug dived to look at him, and then departed hastily.

Then Woodley's head broke the surface, and he started to strangle.

Air gushed into his nostrils, his mouth, his lungs, carrying little knife blades of agony. He coughed and choked, lost his balance, and fell, the water closing over his head. It was pure ecstasy. Woodley sat where he had fallen, gasping, watching air bubbles cascade from his mouth and nostrils. Presently there were no more, and he felt better.

Of course. He might have expected this. But—

Good Lord!

Morgan had changed him, so that water was now

his natural element. Air was as fatal to him now as it would be to a fish.

The thing was manifestly ridiculous and horribly logical. Woodley shut his eyes and thought hard. Eventually he remembered that, normally, he could inhale above water and exhale below. He reversed the procedure, taking a deep breath of water and standing up, dribbling slowly.

He was near the steep, rocky bank of a lake, surrounded by high mountains. Not far away a stream rushed through a gorge to lose itself in the mere. Save for this canyon, the craggy walls were unbroken and seemed unscalable.

Woodley inadvertently breathed air, and had to dive for relief. A familiar voice pierced through his coughs.

"Oh, there you are," Bleys said. "What a time I had finding you. Why didn't you wake me up when you fell in the courtyard?"

Woodley regarded the Druid bitterly, but said nothing. Obviously his plan of escape had failed. He couldn't leave the lake. Not unless the wet magic spell was reversed.

Morgan could do that. Probably she wouldn't, though. Vivienne certainly wouldn't if she could. But Bleys was a magician. If he could be induced to reverse the enchantment—

"Well, come along," the Druid said. "I left my jug at the castle, and I'm thirsty. *Bip!*"

Woodley followed Bleys. His mind was working at top speed. It was necessary to return to Morgans stronghold, but—what then? The testing at the Shaking Rock? Woodley thought of the undine, and bit his lip. Not pleasant—no.

"Draedan can't get out of the yard, you know," Bleys presently remarked. "What possessed you to fall off the balcony anyway? It seems a stupid thing to do."

"I didn't fall," Woodley snapped. "I was pushed. Probably by Sir Bohart."

"Oh?" said Bleys, and puffed at his floating white beard. "Anyhow," he remarked at last, "you can't breathe out of water. It's dangerous to try."

Woodley said slowly, "When I met Vivienne, she was on dry land."

"Morgan taught her the trick," the Druid grunted. "It's beyond me—I never learned it. Any time you want to walk dry again, go see Vivienne." He grinned unpleasantly. "Or Morgan. It's my opinion that Vivienne is Morgan's daughter. That would explain a lot of things. However, here we are back at the castle, and we go in this way." He paused by a door in the outer wall, fumbled with the latch, and stepped across the threshold. "Come along!" he urged. "Don't let the fish in."

He headed along a corridor, Woodley at his heels. Soon they were back in Bleys' apartment, and the Druid was selecting a new jug from his assortment. "Camelot Triple-X Brand," he murmured. "Ninety proof. It isn't, of course, but I label the bottles for old times' sake." He drank, and burst into a furious string of archaic oaths. "Damned self-deception, that's all it is. Ninety proof, hah! Magic never made good liquor, and there's no use arguing about it. *Bip!*" He glared malevolently.

Woodley was brooding. So Bleys didn't know the wet magic spell. Well, that left Vivienne and Morgan. How he could worm the secret out of either of those two, he had no idea. But he'd have to do it somehow, and soon. When would it be time for the testing? He asked Bleys.

"Now," said the Druid, getting up stiffly. "It's nearly sundown. Come along!" He peered at Woodley with bleary eyes. "Vivienne will have a sword for you. It's not Excalibur, but it will serve."

They went to a hall where Vivienne and Sir Bohart were waiting. The knight's jaw dropped at sight of Woodley, but he rallied valiantly. "You've come tardily, messire," he managed to say.

"Better tardy than not at all," Woodley returned, and had the satisfaction of seeing Bohart's eyes flicker. Vivienne moved forward, holding a great sword.

"My lord! With my own hands I shall arm you. And when you return from Shaking Rock, I shall be waiting." Her eyes promised much, and Sir Bohart gnawed his ruddy mustache.

Woodley touched his tunic where he had concealed the mandrake root. His lips twisted in a grim smile. He had an idea—

"Fair enough," he said. "I'm ready."

Vivienne clapped her hands. "Gramercy, a valiant knight! I shall summon Nurmala to guide you—"

"Don't bother," Woodley interrupted. "I'd rather have Sir Bohart show me the way."

The knight made a gobbling sound. "I am no lackey!"

"Fie," Vivienne reproved. "'Tis a simple request to make."

"Oh, well," Woodley shrugged. "If Sir Bohart's afraid, never mind. I can understand how he feels. Even with that magic cuirass, accidents might happen. No, you stay here by the fire, Bohart. You'll feel safer."

Bohart turned purple. There was, of course, only one answer he could possibly make. So, ten minutes later, Woodley walked beside the red-mustached knight through the ooze of the lake bottom toward a towering pinnacle of stone in the green distance.

Sir Bohart preserved a furious silence. Once he rattled his sword in its scabbard, but Woodley

thoughtfully didn't hear. Instead, he remarked, "I wonder what it is behind the Shaking Rock. Got any ideas?"

"Morgan does not tell me her secrets."

"Uh-huh. Still, it must be pretty dangerous. Eh?"

Bohart smiled toothily at that. "I hope so."

Woodley shrugged. "Maybe I'd better use some magic. A sword might not do the trick."

The knight turned his head to stare. "Goety?"

"Sure. I'm a magician. Didn't you know?"

"Vivienne said . . . but I did not think—" There was more respect in Bohart's eyes now, and a touch of fear. Woodley chuckled with a lightheartedness he scarcely felt.

"I know a few tricks. How to make myself invisible, for instance."

"With fern seed? I have heard of that."

"I use mandrake juice," Woodley explained. "Come to think of it, that gag would come in handy now. In view of what may be behind the Shaking Rock—yeah." He moved his hands in intricate gestures. "Saskatchewan, Winnipeg, Mauch Chunk, Philadelphia, Kalamazoo," he added, and deftly slipped the mandrake from his tunic. To the staring Bohart, it seemed as though the gnarled little root had been snatched out of thin water.

"By Atys!" the knight said, impressed. "'Swounds!"

Woodley lifted the mandrake toward his head, and then hesitated. "Wait a minute. Maybe I'd better make you—"

"Make me invisible also?" Bohart jumped at the bait, after one apprehensive glance ahead at the Shaking Rock. "Yes—that would be wise."

"O. K. Let's have your helmet. Uh . . . maybe you could help me out against this . . . monster . . . if I need help. Though I don't think I will."

Bohart's red mustache did not entirely conceal his sardonic smile. "Well, we shall see. My sword is sharp."

But Woodley's apparent attempt to propitiate him had disarmed the knight's suspicions. He handed over his helmet and watched as Woodley inverted it and used the haft of his dagger to mash the mandrake root into pulp, mortar and pestle fashion.

"There. That's all. Put the helmet back on—keep the mandrake in it—and you'll be invisible."

Sir Bohart obeyed. He looked down at himself.

"It doesn't work."

Woodley stared around blankly. "Where are you? I . . . Sir Bohart!"

The knight was taken aback. "I . . . I'm here. But I can see myself as clearly as ever."

"Of course," Woodley explained, not looking at the other, "you can see yourself, but nobody else can. That's the way the mandrake spell works."

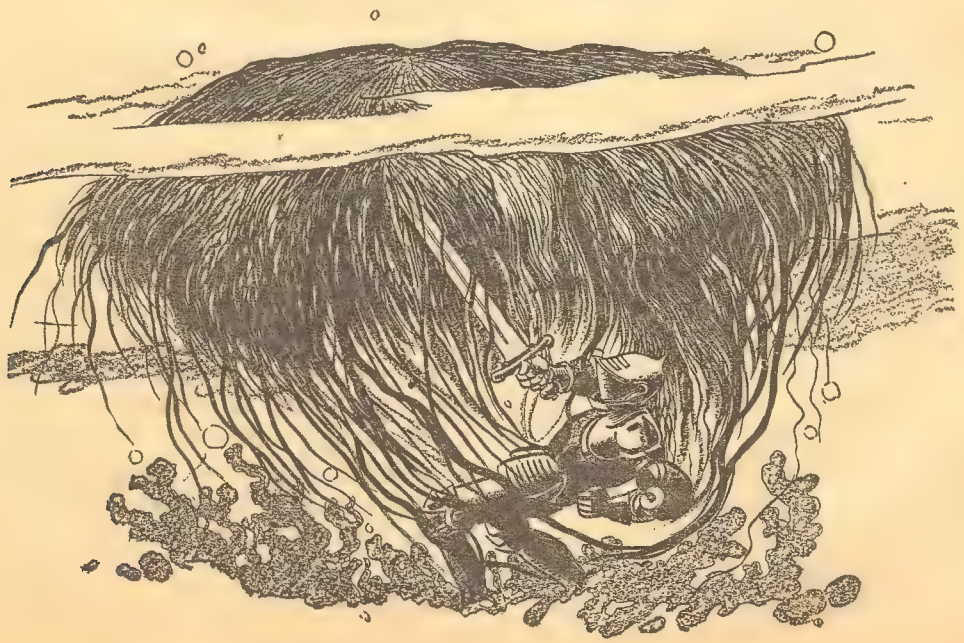
"Oh Well. Make yourself invisible now."

"Too much bother," Woodley said casually. "I don't want all the odds on my side. It takes the fun out of a fight. If I get into trouble, I'll use magic, but I think my sword will be enough. Here we are at the Shaking Rock."

Far above them, a boulder balanced on the stone pinnacle rocked slowly in the lake currents. Woodley noticed a small cave a few yards away. He stopped.

So did Sir Bohart, who was visibly nervous. "I go no farther."

"O. K.," Woodley nodded, his throat dry. "Just wait here, then. I'll be back in a minute. Uh . . .



you wouldn't care to lend me that cuirass of yours, would you?"

"No."

"I thought you wouldn't. Well . . . *adios.*" Woodley lingered a moment longer, eying the cave mouth; but there was no way to turn back now. Anyhow, his trick should work. Nurmala had said that undines were strongly attracted by mandrake juice—

He left Sir Bohart leaning on his sword, and plunged ahead into the shadows that lurked behind the Shaking Rock. He felt the ground slant down steeply, and moved with more caution. There was, after all, little to see. It was too dark.

Something moved in the green gloom. A huge ball of hair that drifted past, paused, and then came with unerring accuracy toward Woodley. It was the undine.

Fifteen feet long, shaped like a fat submarine, it was surrounded by a haziness where the filaments grew finer and vanished. It had no definite edges. It simply faded into the green darkness.

It swam by wriggling its filaments, like a ciliate. Woodley miscalculated its speed, and before he could turn, the undine was shockingly close. A tendril whipped across his cheek, burning like a bare wire overcharged with electric current.

Automatically Woodley whipped out his sword, but sanity held him back from using it. Steel would be no good against this creature. Besides, he had a safer plan. If it wasn't too late—

He turned and ran at top speed around the base of the Shaking Rock. Sir Bohart was still standing there, but at sight of Woodley he, too, whirled and made off, forgetting that he was presumably invisible. But the undine was a sight fearful enough to drive any man to flight.

The mouth of the little cave gaped like a friendly mouth. Woodley went into it headfirst, losing his sword and rolling over several times before he came to a halt. Hastily he twisted about and looked at what was happening. Would the undine follow him? Or would it catch the scent of the mandrake juice—the effluvium hanging in the water where Sir Bohart had stood?

The cloud of wriggling filaments was following the trail. The undine torpedoed in pursuit of the knight—

Woodley sighed deeply. He found his sword, went cautiously toward the mouth of the cave, and watched. Now the undine had caught up with Sir Bohart. Those dangerous filaments couldn't harm the man, of course, protected as he was by his magic cuirass. But it must be definitely uncomfortable to be surrounded and smothered by an undine—

A sword flashed. Sir Bohart was fighting at last. Woodley grinned.

He hoped the undine wouldn't last long. He was getting hungry. But, of course, he'd have to wait till . . . er . . . till he had passed the testing Morgan le Fay had set him.

He was presently roused from his reverie by Bohart's yells. "You tricked me! You lickspittle knave! I'll split you from pate to groin! You made me a cat's-paw—"

"Hold on!" Woodley said, nimbly dodging. He still held his bare sword, and automatically countered Bohart's blow. The undine, he noticed, was quite dead about twenty feet down the slope. Small fishes were already approaching it.

"You craven cur!"

"Wait! What'll Vivienne say if I'm found dead with my head lopped off by a sword? What'll Morgan say?"

That sobered Sir Bohart. He paused, his brand held motionless in midair, the red mustache wriggling with fury. His face was beet-purple.

But he didn't renew the attack. Woodley lowered his own weapon and talked fast.

"Don't forget I was there when Vivienne said she'd sick Morgan on you. I still remember how scared you looked. Vivienne wants me alive, and if she found out you killed me—and she'd certainly find it out—"

"You warlock," Sir Bohart snarled. "You warlock devil!" But there was a betraying mottled pallor in his no longer purple cheeks.

Woodley put his sword away. "What are you kicking about? You didn't get hurt, did you? You've got that magic cuirass. Look at me!" He ran his forefinger over the livid welt that ran from temple to jaw. "The undine put its mark on me, all right. You weren't even scratched."

"You made me your cat's-paw," Bohart said sulkily.

Woodley persuasively slipped his hand through the other's crooked arm. "Forget that. We can be plenty useful to each other, if you'll play along. If you won't—I've got lots of influence with Vivienne. Want me to use it?"

"You devil," the knight growled, but he was licked and knew it. "I'll let you live. I'll have to. Provided you shield me against Morgan." He brightened. "Yes. Tell Vivienne that I am your friend. Then—"

Woodley grinned. "Suppose I told her you pushed me into Draedan's courtyard this afternoon."

"But—messire!" Bohart gripped the other man's shoulders. "Nay! I did not! You cannot prove it was I—"

"It was, though, wasn't it? And Vivienne would take my word against yours. But cool off. I won't tell. If you'll remember something."

Bohart licked his lips. "What?"

"That I killed the undine."

"Oh, a thrice thousand curses! But I suppose I must. If I do this, you will use your influence

with Vivienne, though. She is capricious, and Morgan has often asked her to . . . to—" The knight swallowed and began again. "Morgan wishes to destroy me. So far, Vivienne has not permitted that. Now you and I can strike a bargain. You get the credit for this testing, and in return you insist that I remain free from Morgan—should that danger arise."

"Fair enough."

"But if Morgan should learn of this deceit we have practiced upon her, we will both die—quite terribly. She is unforgiving."

"She won't find out."

"If she should, not even Vivienne could save us."

Woodley frowned slightly. The risk wasn't alluring. Yet it would have to be taken. Besides, Morgan would never find out—

"It is a bargain," Sir Bohart said. "But remember this: if you should ever seek to betray me, it will mean your own downfall. Your life and mine are one now. If I go down, I drag you with me—because then I shall speak. And Vivienne will weep for you, if not for me."

Woodley shivered. With an effort he threw off his intangible fears. "Forget it," he said. "Dinner's waiting. And we've got to tow the undine back to the castle."

That wasn't difficult, since the dead monster floated easily. Plodding along the lake bottom, Woodley felt his spirits rise. Once he touched the hilt of his sword. Wielding a weapon like that was oddly satisfying. Suppose he had not tricked Bohart into aiding him? Suppose he had battled the undine with bare steel alone? Briefly Woodley half regretted that he had not attempted the dangerous deed.

It *would* have been dangerous, though. Far too much so. And there had been no real need to risk his skin, as he had proved. Calm logic was better. Eventually that would get him out of the castle, and back to dry land, free from Morgan's perilous enchantments.

He had passed the testing. So he was safe for a while. The next step was to learn the wet magic spell that would make it possible for him to breathe air again.

Woodley tugged at the bunch of undine filaments in his fist. Behind him, the lake monster floated slowly in his wake, a comet tail of small fishes veering after it. The castle loomed ahead—

"Remember!" Sir Bohart warned. "Our lives are one now. Here is Bleys. No more talk—it is not safe in the castle."

The lake bottom was shrouded in night shadows. It must be past sunset in the world above. Sir Bohart slipped away and was gone. The brown-robed figure of Bleys was visible ahead, by a door in a tower's foot.

"Here's the prize," Woodley called. "Come and get it!"

The Druid plowed forward through the ooze. His eyes gleamed through the waving net of white beard.

"An undine. And you have slain it—"

Woodley felt an extraordinary sense of shame as he met the wizard's gaze. But that was ridiculous! Why the devil should he feel embarrassed because he had hesitated to commit suicide? Hell!

Bleys said slowly, "I told you that courage was both sword and shield. Magic cannot stand against it. Now I—" He paused, his hand going out in a queer fumbling gesture. "Age is heavy upon me. When I saw you bringing your booty toward the castle just now, it seemed to me I was standing beneath the wall of Camelot, watching Arthur Pendragon—"

The low voice tailed off into silence. Bleys said, *"He was and will be."*

Nurmala's murmur broke the spell that held Woodley silent. The naiad rippled through the door in the tower, carrying a lighted lamp.

"Oh! Messire Arthur of Woodley has slain the monster! My lord!" She curtsyed low. "There will be feasting tonight. The table is laid."

Bleys seemed to relapse into his usual drunken self. "All right," he snapped, and the girl turned and went back into the tower. Woodley noticed that the lamp flame shone through the translucent emerald of her body. It looked rather pretty, or would have, had it not been so disturbing.

"Worse than pyromaniacs, those naiads," Bleys remarked, producing a jug and drinking from it. "Can't leave fire alone. Silly to carry a lamp in the castle at night—the place is lighted by magic. Blood and fire, that's all a naiad thinks of. Horrid wet oozy things," he finished, in an outburst of Senile fury. I hate 'em all. I hate everybody. Come along! Leave your undine here; it'll be safe."

Woodley noticed the sharp glance the Druid cast at him, though, and wondered if Bleys was as drunk as he seemed. Apparently so, for his progress along the passage was punctuated by oaths, groans, and bips. He led the way to Woodley's apartment, where the latter made a hasty and inadequate toilet—for one couldn't wash, under the lake—and then hobbled off to the great hall of the castle. Woodley had not seen this room before.

It was very large indeed, and had a gallery halfway up one wall. There were tapestries, dozens of them, rushes on the floor—presumably weighted, since they didn't float up—and a dais at the farther end. There, seated by a fairly small table, was Vivienne. She looked strikingly lovely, in a gown of applegreen satin embroidered with pearls. Her hair was in braids, plaited with pearls, and she

wore a jeweled belt. She, at least, was the essence of magic.

"My lord!" She ran to Woodley. "They told me you were safe. But your poor cheek . . . oh! That horrible undine."

"It's nothing. Doesn't hurt."

"Nothing! To slay an undine . . . yet I knew you would prove yourself a great knight. Come, sit by me here, my love, and we can talk as we sup." Her gaze devoured Woodley, who felt slightly ill at ease.

Grumpily Bleys found a bench for himself and greedily eyed the linen-draped table. "I don't want fish again," he snapped. "Sick of it."

"It's roast pig," Vivienne said, in a glancing aside. "Sea pig. Fowl and pasties . . . ah, my lord! Now that you have passed Morgan's testing, you and I will dwell here forever."

Before Woodley could answer, there was an outburst of music. Slow in tempo, it came from the gallery across the hall, but there was no sign of any musicians. Vivienne followed Woodley's gaze.

"That? Morgan keeps the musicians invisible. They're elementals, and ugly enough to spoil your appetite. The queen will join us later. She does not eat."

A drapery at the back of the dais was pulled aside, and several naiads appeared, each of them, as far as Woodley could make out, exact duplicates of Nurmala. They carried trenchers and trays, serving in complete silence. The food, for the most part, was familiar to Woodley, but some of it tasted strange. The stewed fruit had a definitely uncanny flavor. Nor did he especially like the omnipresent almond-milk flavoring.

Yet he ate heartily, for he was ravenous. And he would need all his energy to carry out his plan—securing the wet magic spell from Vivienne or, perhaps, Morgan. How—

Bleys drank steadily, and Vivienne picked at her food and languished at her self-chosen lover. She insisted that he learn the proper etiquette of Arthurian times.

"We eat from the same trencher, Messire," she said, with a demure twinkle. "You must cut the choicest portions and offer them to me on the point of your knife. I . . . oh, dear. Here is Sir Bohart."

It was indeed the knight, advancing through the rushes. His eyes, fixed on Woodley's, held a warning message.

"Forgive me for my tardiness, my lady," Bohart said. "I did not think Messire Arthur would return so soon from slaying the monster."

With a certain air of coldness, Vivienne welcomed the knight, and soon Sir Bohart was gnawing on a mutton bone and casting furtive glances at Woodley. The supper went on in silence, broken only by the playing of the unseen musicians. At last it was over, with nuts, highly spiced fruit, and wine which Woodley found mild and tasteless. Still, after those spices, vitriol would have seemed like milk, he mused, nursing his tongue. He felt rather like Draedan.

The naiads whisked away the cloth, leaving a smooth-topped table inset with a chessboard. Replete, Woodley settled back. He had earned a rest. Presently he could begin to work on the next problem—the necessary spell that Vivienne held—but not yet. Better to play along with the girl, get in her good graces, as she laid her burnished head on his shoulder.

"Oh, I was telling you about Uther," she said. "And that widow. Ten children, as I said. What a rogue Uther was, to be sure. It seems—"

And she was off, in a cloud of scandal. Bleys drank. Sir Bohart moved uneasily, as though nervous and worried. Woodley dozed. Vivienne unfolded the secrets of the hoary past, and the band played on.

Woodley became aware that Vivienne had stopped talking. He shivered, and, with a sudden sense of abysmal shock, sat bolt upright. Briefly he felt an extraordinary vertigo, and a ghastly sensation as though the flesh was crawling upon his bones.

Then he saw a woman seating herself across the table.

She wore a very plain white gown, with long, trailing sleeves, and there was a band of jeweled flowers about her slim waist. Star flowers glinted in her hair, where hints of bronze showed amid the cloudy darkness. Her face was young and very lovely. Woodley found it difficult to see her face, except in sidewise glances. Why?

He—well, he could not meet her eyes.

He *could not* look into them. He found it utterly impossible to meet her gaze. Why this was, Woodley could not in the least imagine. He forced himself to turn his head so that he could look into the eyes of Morgan le Fay.

And his own eyes would not obey. On the very edge of obedience, they rebelled. It was as though Woodley's flesh revolted against the commands his brain issued.

Yet he could see her face, though not directly, and it seemed oddly familiar. Where had he seen it before?

Of course! That tapestry with the tree and the serpent. Morgan had the face of Lilith—

Woodley stood up, rather awkwardly, and bowed. "Your majesty—"

"No," Morgan said, her voice gentle and abstracted. "You need not rise. I am Morgan—call me that. As I shall call you Arthur." The name

lingered on her tongue, as though she were loath to relinquish it.

Woodley sat down. There was a silence. He tried again to meet Morgan's eyes and failed.

She said, "You slew the undine? Because if you have not passed my testing fairly, nothing can save you. Especially since you are named Arthur. I mislike that name—"

Woodley met Sir Bohart's imploring gaze and swallowed, his throat dry. "I killed the undine. Fairly, of course."

"Very well," said the Queen of Air and Darkness. "Let it be forgotten, then. It has been a long time since I saw anyone from above the lake. Sir Galahodin was the last, I believe."

Bohart coughed nervously. Morgan smiled at him. Her slim fingers tapped the table top.

"He played at chess with me," she added, half maliciously. "You see . . . Arthur . . . for a hundred years or so after I came here, I invited occasional guests. I would play at chess with them. Then I tired of it, and only lately have I felt the . . . need again. It does not matter much; I would not leave the lake for such a slight whim. But Sir Bohart is here, and . . . Vivienne, have you not tired of him yet?"

"I tired of him long ago," the girl said frankly. "But I am used to Sir Bohart and his ways."

"You have a new lover," Morgan murmured. "Will you not withdraw your protection from the old one?"

Sir Bohart squirmed. Arthur said hastily, "Vivienne, I hope . . . I mean, Bohart's promised to show me a lot of things, how to joust and so on. You wouldn't—"

Morgan's slow, sweet voice said to Vivienne, "In time you will tire of this new lover, too, and you will not weep to see him play at chess with me."

Woodley gulped.

"I shall always love Messire Arthur," Vivienne contended stoutly. "When I first saw him, he reminded me of Merlin. Also, since Sir Bohart's company pleases my lord—"

Morgan laughed a little. "Merlin! Ay me! Well, I will not touch Sir Bohart without your permission, but—" She shrugged. "It is in my mind that I would prefer Arthur, indeed. Perhaps the name evokes old memories."

"Er—" said Woodley.

Morgan watched him. "You are safe enough for now. As long as Vivienne is here—and she has no wish to leave the lake—she may have her playthings. But she is human, and a woman—therefore capricious. Sometime she will grow tired of you, Arthur, and then you will play at chess with me."

"I . . . I'm not very good at it," Woodley said, and paused, startled by the shrill cackle of laughter that came from Bleys. The Druid subsided immediately to gulp wine.

"Who plays—*chess*—with Morgan—win or lose, he loses," Bleys said.

Woodley was unaccountably reminded of the Eden tapestry he had seen. Well, he'd have to pry the wet-magic spell out of Vivienne. Morgan was out of the question. She was too—disturbing.

Vivienne said, "As long as I am here, Messire Arthur will not play at chess."

Morgan smiled again. "All things end," she remarked cryptically. "Let us talk of other matters. Has the world forgotten me, Arthur?"

"Oh, no. You're in Tennyson, Malory—you were even in the movies once."

"Movies?"

Woodley explained. Morgan shook her head. "Faith! And no doubt they think *I* am a legend."

Vivienne said, "What were you telling me about history and fable, Morgan? I meant to explain it to Messire Arthur, but I could not understand. He did not know how legend could be true—nor do I, for that matter."

"Tell the story, Bleys," the queen commanded.

The Druid drank wine. "Oh, it's simple enough. Something to do with the fluidity of time. Historically, Pendragon was named Artorius, a petty British chieftain who fought against the Romans, around 500. There weren't any castles or knights then—not like this. We're pure Plantagenet."

Woodley looked puzzled, as he felt. "But I thought—"

"Legends can effect the past. Ever write a story, Messire Arthur?"

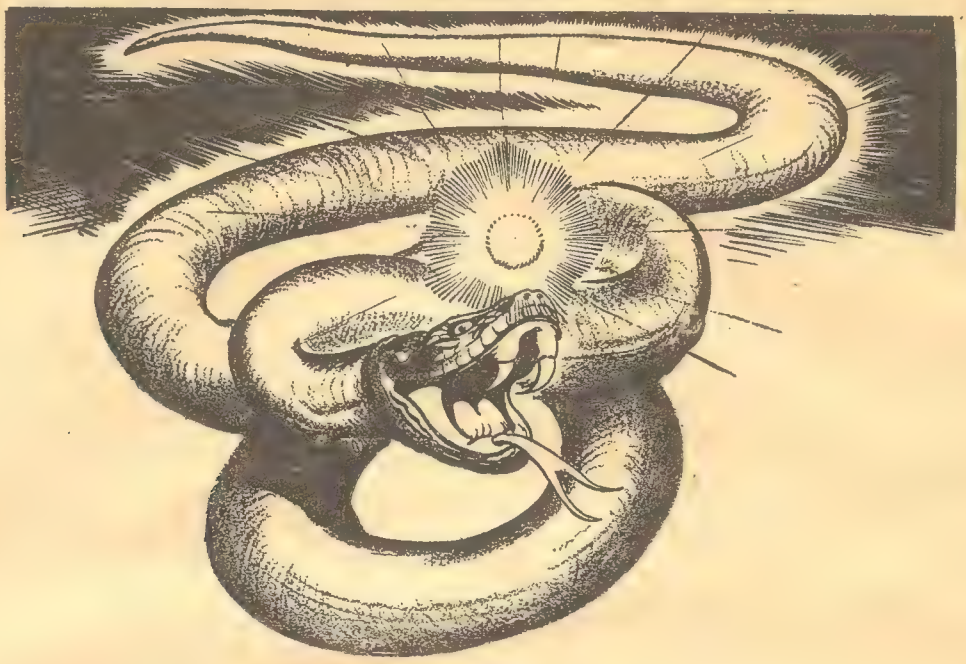
"Well—I've tried a scenario or two."

"Then you've doubtless gone back to make insertions and revisions. Suppose you're writing a history of the world. You deal with Artorius and his time historically, go on for a few thousand words, and then get a better idea. You decide to make Artorius a great king, and to build up a heroic saga about knighthood and the round table—about Bleys and Guenevere and Merlin and so forth. You just go back and make the insertion. Later on, you have one of your other characters, named Malory, make a number of references to the Arthurian cycle. Law of compensation and revision," Bleys said ambiguously.

"But we're not talking about stories," Woodley contended. "We're talking about real events. Life isn't just a story somebody's writing."

"That's what you think," the Druid retorted rudely. "And a lot you know about it. *Bip!*"

There was a silence, broken when Vivienne began to retail some long-forgotten scandal about Yseult and a Dolorous Knight. As usual Woodley went to sleep. His last memory was the sight of Morgan's half-glimpsed face, lovely, mysterious, and terrible.



He awoke in bed, to find Nurmala peering in through the curtains. "We breakfast early, my lord," the naiad bubbled. "Will it please you to rise?"

"Is it morning?"

"Sunlight shines through the lake."

"Oh," said Woodley, and followed his routine of struggling into his drawers under the sheets. This seemed to baffle Nurmala, who presently quivered out of the room. Sight of her green jello back made Woodley realize that he was hungry.

In the great hall he found only Vivienne. He had a slight headache, and, after responding to the girl's request for a kiss, fell to upon ale, rolls, and salt fish. He would have preferred tomato juice. There was no invisible orchestra in the gallery this morning.

"Cozy place," he remarked, shivering a little. "I've never had breakfast in Grand Central Station before."

She caught his meaning. "All the castles had a great hall. After this we can eat in the solar, if you like. In the old days there were mighty feasts. Boards were laid on trestles to make tables —sometimes we have banquets even now."

"Visitors—down here?" Woodley asked, puzzled.

"Morgan raises the dead," Vivienne explained. "It amuses her, at times."

"Well, it doesn't amuse me," said the horrified man. "Where is Morgan this morning?"

"She is—busy. Bleys? Trying to get drunk, I suppose. Senile creature that he is."

"Well, where's Sir Bohart?" Woodley wanted to know.

There was a strange look in Vivienne's eyes. "After you fell asleep last night, and after Bohart had gone to his apartment, Bleys told me how that craven knight hurled you into the dragon's courtyard. So I withdrew my protection from him. Now he plays at chess with Morgan."

Woodley choked on ale. "Oh, my g-guh . . . Vivienne, where is he?"

"He plays at chess with Morgan. You will not see him again."

Woodley put down the drinking horn. His stomach was churning coldly. So the worst had happened. Bleys had remembered, and had talked. Now—

"Vivienne! I thought you intended to keep Bohart alive. You've got to save him!"

"After he tried to murder you? Nay! Besides, it is too late. The . . . game . . . will not finish till sundown, but Sir Bohart is already beyond rescue."

The girl's dark brows drew together. "That reminds me. Morgan wants to see you."

"She . . . she does?"

"Tonight, she said. I do not know why. Something Sir Bohart told her, she said. It does not matter."

"Oh, doesn't it," Woodley muttered, and finished the ale. It didn't help much. He could visualize the future all too well. Bohart, facing destruction, had revealed to Morgan the trick about the undine. And what had Morgan said last night?

"If you have not passed my testing fairly, nothing can save you."

Tonight would be zero hour, then. Woodley had until sundown—perhaps a little more time than that, but certainly not much more.

One day, in which to learn the wet magic spell from Vivienne!

Abruptly Woodley determined on a bold move.

An attack was the best defense.

"Vivienne," he said. "I want to go back."

She did not move. "You will stay with me always."

"Suppose Morgan—does something to me?"

"She will not. And—" Vivienne's eyes darkened. "And I would rather have it thus than let you go back above the lake, where other women would have you. Mark you, Arthur; you cannot breathe above water now. Only Morgan or I can change that. In air you die. *We* will not help you to leave the lake. And if you try—I shall bring you back, messire. Listen!" She leaned toward him, elbows on the chessboard table. "You are invisible and intangible to humans. You are one of us. Your voice could not be heard by any but the magic folk."

"You could change me back, Vivienne!"

"And let another woman have you? I would sooner see you a corpse. Do not speak of this again, messire, lest I change my mood and tell Morgan she may have you for a chess partner!"

"Don't bother," Woodley said through tight lips. "Morgan can take care of herself."

But he realized he had gone too far, and taken the wrong tack with Vivienne. So he placated her—and she was responsively willing. At last, head on his shoulder, she began to talk about Sir Pellinore and the Questing Beast. "Glatisant, its name was," she explained, all velvet now. "Old Pellinore got tired of his wife and said he had to go questing. Honor demanded it. So off he went, cavorting through Britain. Nobody ever saw the Beast but Pellinore—and many's the wench who listened to Pellinore's stories about Glatisant, to her sorrow. Forsooth! You could mark Pellinore's trail nine months after he passed. I always say—"

Woodley wasn't listening. He was thinking, hard and fast. He knew now, quite definitely, that he had to get out of the lake before sundown. Morgan . . . she was not, he thought, of human blood at all. And that—chess game!

What nightmare that euphemism masked he could not guess. But he knew very well he didn't want to play chess with the Queen of Air and Darkness, as poor Bohart was doing now. Again Woodley remembered the Eden tapestry—

How could he escape?

He was invisible and intangible—and dumb—to humans. No one could see, hear or sense him. Except the magic folk, whoever they were. Moreover, once Woodley got out of the lake, he would strangle.

Wait! There was a thought somewhere along that line. Men could live under water, in diving suits. Presumably Woodley could live in air, if he could arrange to breathe water continuously.

A diving suit was obviously out of the question. But—good lord!—all Woodley needed was a bowl of water to carry with him! He almost grinned at the thought, but masked his face in time.

In this rocky country there were few streams—only one emptying into the lake. But . . . let's see . . . Woodley didn't want to be a water-breather all his life; it would be horribly inconvenient.

And Vivienne would pursue him. She could fly—

Woodley strained his memory. Wasn't there something in the Arthurian legend that would help him? He had a vague glimmer of an idea . . . Merlin.

In his dotage, Merlin fell in love with Vivienne and followed her all through Britain. Finally the girl, tired of her ancient lover, learned a spell from him and used it to shut Merlin up inside the trunk of an oak. If Merlin were only around!

"Good lord!" said Woodley, sitting up. "Uh . . . oh, nothing, darling. Something bit me."

"Poor dear," said Vivienne, snuggling closer. "After killing that undine yesterday . . . well, as I was saying, this knight climbed down from the tower and hid in the moat till—"

Woodley was remembering his experience just before he had met Vivienne—that little cave of roots under an oak tree, where something had kicked him in the pants. Soon after that, Vivienne had said that he "smelled of Merlin."

Merlin—of course!—was in that oak!

And no doubt feeling embittered toward Vivienne. Woodley's memory of Malory told him that Merlin and Morgan le Fay had always been bitter enemies. Usually Merlin had triumphed.

Merlin would help him now, out of sheer gratitude, if he could free the wizard. Certainly Merlin could reverse the wet magic, make Woodley an air-breather again, and protect him against Morgan and Vivienne. Shut up in that oak for centuries—ha!

It was beautifully logical. And all Woodley had to do, therefore, was to learn the spell that would free Merlin.

Bleys was the answer to that.

"Darling," said Woodley suddenly, "what happened to the clothes I was wearing when you brought me to the lake?"

"Why?" Suspicion showed in the dark eyes.

"I want a cigarette." He explained about tobacco. The girl nodded.

"Of course. Morgan can make some, by magic, but it will take time till she finds the right spell. I'll have your things brought here. Nurmala!"

The naiad came translucently from behind the curtain, listened, and went away, to return with Woodley's clothing. He searched for and found the cigarettes, which were magically dry. Of course, it was quite impossible to smoke under water, but . . . Woodley blew a smoke ring.

He glanced keenly at Vivienne. "Try it, darling?"

Under his tutelage, the girl learned about tobacco. Ten minutes later, her face a rather becoming shade of mauve, she interrupted an involved story about Guenevere and Borre to leave the room. She did not return.

Tense with nervous excitement, Woodley found the flask of brandy still in the pocket of his uniform. It was more than half full. Good!

He went to Bleys' apartment. On the way, he picked up a glazed crockery bowl, which he thoughtfully left just outside the Druid's door.

"May I come in?"

"Bip!"

Woodley took this for assent. He found Bleys fuming over a retort and sampling the contents of a jug.

"Dish water!" Bleys shrilled. "Hog slop! Pap for suckling babes! After working hours over the spell, I felt sure it would be at least thirty proof. May Satan crumble my bones! No—" he added hastily, glancing around, "I take it back."

"Try this," Woodley offered, holding out the flask. "I'd forgotten I had it with me."

Bleys' eyes glistened through his floating beard as his clawlike hand shot out. "Dry-land liquor? Messire Arthur, I love you for this! Wine? Ale?"

"Brandy. Try it."

Bleys took one swallow. Then he lowered the flask, his lips twitching convulsively, his head thrown back. A low purring came from deep in his throat.

"Brandy." His voice caressed the word. His eyes opened, a greedy, mad gleam in them. "I shall get drunk! For the first time in centuries!"

"No," said Woodley, who had recaptured the flask. "Sorry. That's all you get."

"B-but—" Bleys' jaw dropped. "Messire Woodley! You jest!"

"Like hell I do," Woodley said grimly.

"Wait," said the Druid, slobbering. "I'll make you wine. Mead. Ale. Tons of it. I'll give you anything."

Woodley waited. Finally he decided he had Bleys where he wanted him. "O. K.," he said then, "you can have the rest of the brandy. But you've got to pay me for it. I want a certain—spell."

Bleys looked shrewd. "The spell to change a water-dweller to an air-breather? All right."

"No, you don't," Woodley snapped, drawing the flask out of reach. "You told me once that you didn't know it. No tricks, now."

"Well," the Druid said sulkily, "what *do* you want, then?"

"Does Mer . . . did Merlin know the wet-magic spell?"

"Yes, he did. Merlin was my pupil once, you know, but he learned far more than I ever did. Why?"

Woodley sighed with relief. "Never mind. Do you know the spell to release a man shut up in an oak tree?"

For a long time Bleys said nothing. Then he whirled to a nearby table, picked up a jug, and drank from it. With a furious oath he sent the ewer smashing against the floor.

"Slop!" he shrilled. "I cannot drink this stuff forever! The oak tree enchantment? Oak is a Druid tree. Of course I know it."

"Then tell it to me," Woodley said. "For the brandy."

Greed triumphed. At last Bleys explained the formula.

"That's the right one?"

"It is. *Bip!* Give me the brandy!"

"Swear it by . . . uh . . . Mider."

"By Mider I swear it," Bleys said angrily. "You are a fool, Messire Arthur. But do as you will. If Morgan slays me, at least I will die drunk."

He drank brandy. Woodley turned away.

The Druid's voice halted him. "Wait. I have a thought."

Bleys was shaking his head, his beard streaming, as he blinked through watery eyes. "This—brandy—clears my brain. Strange. I have been half-drunk for too long . . . a minute." He drank again.

Woodley hesitated, remembering Morgan. But the Druid's skinny hand clutched his arm. Bleys peered up, searching the other's face with his bleary stare.

"Arthur . . . I should have thought of this before. When I saw you bringing back the undine yesterday . . . Bah, to be in one's dotage—I grow old and stupid. Yet I remember now."

He tightened his grip. "You must listen. It is important. Perhaps because Morgan mislikes you, perhaps because your name is Arthur—listen! Do you remember that I told you the course of history can be changed? That time is fluid?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Strong characters twist an author's pen and change the story he writes. Artorius of Britain did that. He was a petty chieftain, but he was strong—valorous. So strong that he forced himself into a greater role than he had originally. There was a—revision. This petty chieftain took Excalibur and made a legend. As Arthur Pendragon he saved England from the powers of the dark."

Woodley glanced at the door, anxious to be gone. "Well?"

"On Arthur's tomb are the words—he was and will be. There is a legend that Arthur will come again, in the hour of England's need, to save her

once more. Has that hour come?"

"Then—" Woodley stopped, licking his lips. He stared at Bleys.

"Listen again!" The talon fingers tightened. "Any man can be Arthur, if he is strong enough to twist the author's pen. Any man can be Arthur, if he dares to hold Excalibur. And your name—

"Your life may not have been a great one, till now. That does not matter. Artorius was not great, till he held Excalibur. Do you know why I am here, why Morgan has kept me her prisoner?"

"Why?"

"I am Excalibur's guardian," Bleys said. "After Merlin passed, the charge was given to me. Arthur slept in Avalon. Yet the prophecy said that in England's hour of need, he would come again, and I must offer Excalibur to him. I looked to see Pendragon," the Druid went on quietly. "I had forgotten that Pendragon was once merely Artorius. Now I think the time has come. It was not chance that brought you beneath the lake. Excalibur lies here, ready for your hand. With it you can be Arthur."

Woodley's eyes were shining. "Bleys—" He paused, biting his lip. "Morgan."

"With Excalibur you can conquer her—and more. The man who holds Cut-Steel will save England!"

"Why haven't you used it on Morgan?" Woodley asked quickly.

"I am its guardian—the only man in all earth who can never hold that brand." There was a strange, deep sorrow in Bleys' voice. It was incongruous that he should seem a figure of such dignity, in his dingy brown robe—

"I know what is in your mind," the Druid said. "Escape and safety. It is not the right way. Excalibur lies ready for your hand. I have seen the portents, and I think the time has come. Remember—any man can be Arthur. If he has the courage to take and wield Excalibur. Artorius had that courage. Gawaine, the son of Morgawse, did not; Cut-Steel was offered him first, and he was afraid. And now—"

"I—can be Arthur," Woodley said, very softly.

"You can change past, present, and future. A strong and brave man can alter history. Your own past does not matter. If you take Excalibur now, there will be—revisions."

Woodley did not answer. He was remembering the way a sword hilt had felt against his palm, and the strange, high excitement that had filled him when he matched steel briefly against Bohart. To hold Excalibur—

To be Arthur!

"You can be the man," Bleys said. "You slew the undine. I should have known then that you were the man for whom I had waited."

But Woodley had not slain the undine. A small cold sickness crawled suddenly in his stomach. He said, "If I took . . . Excalibur . . . what would I have to do?"

Bleys' scrawny body trembled with excitement. "You would know. First, slay Morgan. After that your star would lead you."

Slay Morgan?

Somehow a sword, even Excalibur, seemed a poor weapon against the horror of her eyes. Even now the enchantress might be finishing Bohart and preparing for the next victim.

Suppose Woodley took Excalibur and failed to conquer Morgan? Suppose he couldn't wield the magic sword? After all, he hadn't really killed the undine. He had depended on strategy, which was perhaps more dependable than courage alone.

If Woodley had had no alternative, he would have battled Morgan, and done his best. He thought so, anyhow. But the alternative was so much safer!

Besides—he wasn't Arthur!

Not that he was a coward—no. But Bleys' proposition was a gamble, pure and simple. And why should Woodley gamble with his own future at stake? Merlin was in the oak, and Merlin, with all his mighty powers, was certainly a match for Morgan le Fay. This way was logical, much safer, and with the odds in his favor.

And yet—certainly there was something very splendid about the alternative Bleys was offering. Excalibur! To hold such a weapon! Briefly his mind flamed with the idea. Armed with that enchanted sword, he would have little need to fear even the Queen of Air and Darkness.

Provided—and that was the hitch!—provided he could hold Cut-Steel. What if he wasn't the man? Certainly he didn't feel very much like Arthur Pendragon. In the wrong hands Excalibur would be worse than useless—probably it couldn't even be wielded. Woodley's scalp crawled at the thought of himself facing Morgan's terrible gaze armed with a useless sword—

No, it was too much of a gamble. Accepting this glittering offer *might* mean finding himself completely defenseless against Morgan, with all chance of escape gone. The dice were too heavily loaded. Merlin meant certain safety.

The Druid bent forward, eager-eyed. "Excalibur is hidden in a place where only Arthur would dare enter. Let me show you that place."

Woodley took a deep breath.

"Bleys," he said, his voice not quite steady. "I think I've got a better idea. I'm going to try it, anyhow. If it doesn't work, I'll be back to fight Morgan."

The Druid's figure seemed to shrink in upon itself. Bleys let fall his hand from Woodley's arm and stepped back.

"Gawaine," he said. "Excalibur is not offered twice."

"But—I'll fight Morgan, if I have to. Only—"

There was no answer, only stony silence. Woodley hesitated, feeling, curiously, as though he had failed some vital test. He turned at last to the door, leaving Bleys sitting on the floor, pouring brandy down his throat.

For a moment there had been a curious, somber dignity to the old man; the brandy had paradoxically made him soberer than Woodley had ever seen him. All that was gone now. Except for a little discouraged sag to the shoulders, he looked as he had always looked, dingy and drunk.

"Good-bye, fool," he said. *"Bip!"*

Woodley nodded and let the curtain fall back, picking up the crockery bowl he had left outside the door. Then he went in search of the portal by which Bleys and he had entered the castle yesterday. He was thinking uncomfortably of Bleys' proposal—and almost regretting his decision.

But it was much more important to be watching for possible guards. Suppose he encountered Vivienne? Or even Morgan? But not even a naiad appeared. Ten minutes later Woodley was climbing the lake bottom.

Fish swam past. He plodded on. And at last his head broke water.

Well—he had made his decision. He hoped it had not been the wrong one. There was only one way to find out—

He filled the crockery bowl, and, when he had to breathe again, he did so after dipping his face into the water. It worked.

He repeated the process half a dozen times before he felt satisfied. Then he made for the shore. The stream burst out of its gorge a few hundred feet to the left. Woodley reached it and discovered that the canyon, though steep, was by no means unscalable.

He looked back. Behind him, the still surface of the lake shone like silver under the midday sun. Was that—his heart jumped—was that something leaping up from the depths?

Only a fish, thank Heaven. But the sight reminded Woodley of the urgent need for speed. He inadvertently breathed air, and spluttered and coughed for a time with his face in the water. Then he turned to the gorge.

He climbed fast. Nor had he far to go—half a mile or less, till he recognized the spot where he had first met Vivienne. The oak must be a few hundred yards beyond.

Some instinct made him look up. High above, toward the lake, a bird was wheeling in midair. No—not a bird—Vivienne!

"Lord!" Woodley breathed, and dived under a projecting rock. He lay hidden for a time. When he dared to peer out again, Vivienne had vanished. Luckily she had not yet glimpsed her quarry.

At any rate, Morgan herself presumably wasn't warned yet. That was something. Woodley hurried on up the gorge. He had difficulty in breathing, somehow. The water in the bowl choked him. He replenished it from the stream and went on. He caught sight of the oak.

It was as he had remembered, with the little root-cavern under it. So this was Merlin's prison!

Now for it. Woodley refilled the bowl, climbed the bank, and experimentally approached the tree. There was no sign of Vivienne—as yet.

His skin felt hot and dry. He would have liked to immerse himself in the brook, but it was too small, and, in any case, there was no time to waste. The spell Bleys had given him—

Woodley plucked seven oak leaves and laid them in a row on the ground before the tree. He put his face into the bowl, took a deep breath, and lifted his head. Now—

His skin was burning like fire. Woodley knew he had to get back to the water fast—not merely to breathe it, but to keep himself from shriveling up like a beached jellyfish.

He said the spell, a short one, articulating each word carefully.

There was a clap of thunder, a streak of lightning, and, with a terrific crash, the bole of the oak split asunder. Woodley had a moment's fear that the commotion would attract Vivienne.

The tree's trunk was hollow. A man stepped out.

It was Merlin Ambrosius, a tall, dignified man with a hooked nose and a long white beard. He looked exactly like a professor of history, except for his brown robe and hood.

"Merlin!" Woodley said, his voice tense with relief, and hastily dipped his face into the bowl. Let Vivienne come now! Merlin was free!

"Oh, dear, dear," said the wizard, in a querulous voice. "You . . . you're not Arthur? But no; I can see that you're not. Why do people meddle so? Why can't you mind your own business?"

Woodley said, quite stupefied, "I . . . I've freed you from the oak where Vivienne imprisoned you."

Merlin threw up his hands. "What in Heaven's name ever gave you that fantastic idea? One of Vivienne's stories, I suppose. She wouldn't want the truth to get out, of course. Name of Mider! For centuries she's been looking for this oak, trying to find me, ever since I shut myself up here."

"You—shut yourself up?"

"I presume you've met Vivienne," Merlin said, with furious patience. "A lovely girl. A charming girl. But she talks like a magpie. Scandal, scandal, scandal, morning, noon, night and Sabbaths. She followed me all around Britain—I couldn't get away from the wench. How she loved me! And how she talked! I couldn't think straight. Every time I tried to work out a spell, she'd begin babbling about the affair Duke Some-

body had with Dame Somebody Else. Oh, no!" Merlin said emphatically. "It wasn't Vivienne who shut me up in this oak. I shut myself up, and I've had a very pleasant time since, thank you, except when Vivienne got dangerously close. I've been napping, off and on, and working out some lovely new magic. But I was always afraid that beautiful, brainless, chattering magpie would find me some day and make my life a hell again.

"But no more," Merlin said very firmly. "I've worked out a new spell for which there's no antidote. It begins *somnus eternatis,* and I'm going to use it to shut myself up again in this oak. When I've done that, not the devil himself can ever open this tree again. I should have used it long ago, but I didn't think a few centuries would matter much, one way or another."

"But!" said Woodley, who had been alternating between the bowl and staring at Merlin. "You won't help me, then?"

"Oh, I'll help you," the wizard grunted. "That'll be easy enough. I'll take off the wet magic and protect you against Morgan and Vivienne—as I read your mind, that's what you want. It won't take long. Then I'll just go back in my tree, and after I've used my new spell, it'll be sealed inside and out. I can't get out, ever, and nobody can ever get in. Arthur won't need me, anyway, when he comes again. He'll have Excalibur."

There was a *swoosh* in the air behind Woodley. He whirled, to see Vivienne flying down at him, her hair streaming behind her. So the thunderclap of the oak's opening *had* summoned her!

"Messire Arthur!" she shrilled. "So there you are!"

Merlin let out a whoop of dismay and stepped back into the tree. His voice rose in a hurried incantation.

"Somnus eternatis—"

There was a joyous shriek from Vivienne. "Merlin!" she screamed. "My love Merlin! At last!"

She swooped down, past Woodley, knocking the bowl from his hands. Merlin was inside the hollow oak, frantically intoning his spell. And then Vivienne had reached him, had flung her arms around the struggling wizard's neck, was planting passionate kisses on his bearded cheeks—

Crash!

Lightning blazed; thunder rolled; and the oak slammed shut like two halves of a door. Woodley, automatically holding his breath, stood gaping at the tree. Merlin and Vivienne had vanished.

He scooped up the unbroken bowl and raced back to the stream, where he replenished it. His body was burning like fire, and he hastily splashed water upon himself. Then, the bowl refilled, he clambered up the bank to the tree and plucked seven oak leaves.

He repeated Bleys' incantation, but nothing happened. He tried it again and again—six times in all. No use. Merlin and Vivienne were sealed within the oak.

Woodley went back and sat in a shallow pool, bending forward occasionally to breathe. Where his skin was exposed to the air, it was sheer agony. He longed to immerse his whole body, but the stream was too shallow here, and he could only pour water from the bowl over his skin. It didn't help much.

If Merlin had only had time to take off the wet magic spell—if Vivienne had not arrived when she did—

Woodley gnawed at his lips. If he could only get help—

If he had only accepted Excalibur—

Help was far away. Woodley knew he had to stay near water, where he could replenish the bowl from time to time. With a hollow reed, he might contrive to aerate the water he carried with him, but he could not expose his skin to air for very long. Like a jellyfish, he could not live in sunlight and air.

If he could find a deep pool—

But there was none. The shallow stream raced steeply down the gorge without pausing. Only in the lake itself could Woodley survive.

"No," he thought. "I'll stay here. It'll be an easier death. Bohart—"

But the weakness of his flesh betrayed him. Minute by minute the burning agony crawling along his skin became worse. It was intolerable—unendurable.

There was no other way. He must return to the lake. And—Morgan le Fay.

Woodley began to stumble down the gorge. After all, he need not go back to the castle itself. He could hide somewhere, under the water, where Morgan might not find him—

The cleft ended. Woodley's feet splashed into deepening water.

For a very brief moment, he saw a mirage. It seemed to him that an arm, draped in white samite, rose from the smooth surface of the lake, and that it brandished a sword that flamed with intolerable brightness in the sunlight.

It was gone. Woodley splashed deeper. It was only a mirage.

No revisions—this time.

The grateful coolness of the water soothed his burning skin. It closed over his head. Woodley dropped flat on the lake bottom, luxuriating in the element that meant relief to his parched throat and lungs. For a long time he lay there, unconscious of his surroundings. It was enough merely to relax.

The lake grew darker. The sun dropped behind the peaks. An inquisitive trout investigated Woodley's hair and flicked away as he stirred.

Merlin—Bleys—no help there. He must find a

hiding place. That cave in the Shaking Rock. Morgan might not find him there.

His body was no longer afire. Slowly Woodley rose and began to descend the slope of the lake bottom. A green twilight surrounded him.

Then he saw—something—slowly stirring at his feet.

For a moment Woodley's shocked eyes could not quite comprehend what he saw. He gave a little choking gasp of nausea. It was not the actual appearance of the—thing—so much as the unmistakable fact that it had once been Sir Bohart.

And it still lived, after a fashion.

Morgan's chess game was finished.

Woodley shut his eyes, squeezing the lids tight together, as he fought down the sickness of his human flesh, revolting from that which Morgan had done. Through the dark came a voice.

"She plays at chess with Bleys now," it said.

Woodley tried to speak, but could not. That which should have had no voice went on thickly:

"She dared not slay him before, since he held Excalibur for Arthur. But the hour for Arthur's coming has passed, she said to me before I died, and she has no more fear."

The thing did not speak again, for it had disintegrated.

Woodley opened his eyes then. The green twilight had darkened. He could see little, except a great black shadow far below that was the castle. To the right was another blot of darkness—the Shaking Rock, perhaps.

He could hide there—

No. Morgan would find him. Woodley half turned to retrace his steps, but remembrance of the agony he had suffered in air halted him. He could not endure that again.

But—it would be better than playing chess with Morgan. Woodley knew, at last, what that euphemism cloaked. Poor Bleys!

He thrust that thought, and the memory of Bohart, out of his mind. He knew, now, what he had to do. It was the only way. A clean, final solution, with sharp steel, thrust through his heart. It would be the period to his failure.

His hand went to his belt, but the sword was not there. He had removed it, Woodley remembered, in his apartment after the slaughter of the undine. Well—the dagger, then.

That, too, was gone. He was unarmed.

Briefly a racking sickness shook Woodley. He dared not remain alive now, to suffer the same fate as Bohart. Again he glanced back.

Well, he would not leave the lake again. It would mean unnecessary suffering. Somehow he would find a way to kill himself. Even if he had to enter the castle again—

It came to that, in the end. There was no other way. No weapons existed under the lake, except in Morgan's stronghold. Woodley knew which door to use—the one Bleys had showed him. He was encouraged by the thought that he was not apt to encounter Morgan. She would be busy—

Nevertheless, he kept to the shadows as he crept along the corridor. A curious darkness seemed to have fallen over the castle. The vague, sourceless light had dimmed. It was utterly silent.

He saw no one—not even Nurmala, as he cautiously hurried to his apartment. But there were no weapons in evidence. They had been removed.

Well—there might be a dagger in Bleys' room. He went there. The door was closed and locked, and Woodley dared not risk the noise of breaking it down.

The armory?

Fear mounted within him as he went through the castle. Something was crouching in the shadows, watching him. Worst of all was the thought that Morgan, somewhere here, was playing at chess with Bleys.

Bleys—Bohart—*Morgan!*

At the end of a hall he saw a door agape, and beyond it the sheen of steel. The armory, then. As he hurried forward, a curtain billowed out at his side, and Woodley froze, seeing what was embroidered on that white surface. A coiled snake, with a golden star above its lifted head. Morgan's apartment.

Somehow Woodley crept past. Somehow he reached the armory, and chose a sword at random. An ordinary enough blade, but sharp. Not Excalibur, though. His lips twisted at the thought.

This would be a clean death. Or, perhaps, a dagger would be better. He selected one.

But his fingers remained curled about the sword hilt. He had forgotten how strangely satisfying it was to hold a blade. The weapon was like an extension of his own body, giving him a power he had not possessed before.

Woodley looked at the dagger. Then he thrust it into his belt. He hefted the sword.

Not Excalibur. He could never hope to hold Cut-Steel now. He could never hope to slay Morgan, or even to face her—

Woodley's face changed. His hand tightened on the sword hilt. He was remembering his last words to Bleys.

"I think I've got a better idea. I'm going to try it, anyhow. If it doesn't work, I'll be back to fight Morgan."

Fight her? Without Excalibur? The thought was mockingly hopeless. Yet, oddly, a curious sort of anger was beginning to glow within Woodley.

From the beginning, Morgan had had it all her own way. Everyone was afraid of her. Secure in her dark magic, she had done exactly as she liked, trampling roughshod over those who got in

her way. Perhaps she had felt some fear that Arthur would come again, and destroy her. Now that menace was gone. Morgan was confident—and with reason.

No one had dared to oppose her. The thought of Morgan's triumph now was suddenly unendurable to Woodley. She had not even troubled to follow and destroy him. She knew that he would skulk back, and perhaps kill himself to save her the trouble of . . . of crushing him, as she would crush a fly.

Bleys—Bohart—the thing that had been Bohart—Why had the armory door been left open? Had Morgan known what Woodley intended to do?

Sudden anger darkened his face. Damn her! He had failed—yes. But this—

Very well. He had to die; there was no possible escape now. But at least he could give Morgan the trouble of having to kill him herself!

Hot with anger, Woodley whirled and hurried back along the passage. At the white drapery he hesitated for a brief moment. Then he flung it aside and stepped across the threshold.

The room was empty. The wall that faced him was not a wall. It was, he thought, a curtain of black cobwebs that hung from ceiling to floor. Or it was a tapestry of darkness, intangible, shifting—more of Morgan's magic.

Damn Morgan, anyway!

Woodley marched forward. Out of the dark curtain two armored knights came pacing, visors concealing their faces. They lifted their swords in grim silence.

Woodley grinned. He had held his own against Sir Bohart—this would be no pigsticking, anyway. He'd give Morgan some trouble before she destroyed him.

He did not wait for the attack; he ran in, lightly as a cat, feinting at one of the knights. A reasonless confidence seemed to distill in him from the feel of the sword against his hand. Arthur must have felt like this, long ago, when he held Excalibur— As the knight's brand swept down Woodley, unencumbered by heavy armor, sprang aside, and his sword point slipped through the bars of the knight's visor. It stuck there, trapped by bone.

The other attacker cut at Woodley. There was no time to recover a sword; his own was stuck beyond retrieving and the other man's had shattered to flinders against the stone floor. Woodley felt pain bite into his arm. He hurled himself forward, grappling with the cold, unyielding steel of the body before him, fumbling for the dagger at his belt. Almost of its own volition his heel hooked behind the other's ankle. They crashed down together, armor thundering.

Woodley's dagger grated across steel and found that vulnerable spot beneath the arm where the cuirass always fails its wearer. The sharp blade sank and rose and sank again.

Woodley tore the sword from the dying knight's hand and leaped up. Out of the dark curtain of cobweb a serpent came sliding, coil upon shining coil. A point of light danced above its head. Morgan's emblem—Morgan's familiar.

Woodley did not wait for the great coils to loop him—and they were not proof against the sword he wielded. The snake's thick blood poured through its gashed side as it threw itself about him, bruising, tremendous. Woodley hacked blindly.

The flags were slippery with blood when he rose from the loosening folds of the serpent above whose head the star no longer trembled.

On unsteady legs Woodley went forward to meet a laughing, crimson thing that was hideously anthropomorphic. He left it more crimson still, but no longer laughing. And this time nothing else emerged from the veil.

Beyond there was only a faint crimson glow through which shapeless shadows loomed. Dimly in the red dark he saw Morgan at the end of the room rising from a table. Bleys sat across from her, lifting a pale, incredulous face as he saw Woodley. He was apparently unharmed as yet, but Bleys did not speak.

Morgan turned her terrible gaze upon the newcomer. As always, Woodley's eyes slipped away. He could not meet it. But he saw that her strange, lovely face was expressionless. She was not afraid. Of course not. Nothing could harm her—

He moved forward in the gloom, lifting his sword. Morgan's hand rose, and the blade crumbled in his grasp. Woodley stared down stupidly, a dull anger brightening in his mind behind the pain and the despair. He tore out his dagger and lurched forward.

Morgan's hand rose again, and the dagger fell to dust.

Now he stood unarmed, facing Morgan across the gulf of crimson shadows. But the confidence that had distilled from the feel of the sword in his hand remained. He was not afraid. His courage and strength had not lain in the blade alone.

He took a long step forward into the dimness. Morgan burned white a dozen yards away, blotting out everything else. The glimmer of her pale throat made his fingers twitch unconsciously. He stumbled another step forward.

At his knee in the gloom something bulky touched him. He looked down. It was a stone anvil, and a sword stood embedded deep in the stone.

A weapon! A weapon against Morgan. He though of no more than that as his fingers curled lovingly about the jeweled hilt. There was a moment of hesitation before the blade slid free,

and the hilt quivered in his palm as if it were alive.

But when he swung the sword up shoulder high it was as if he lifted a suddenly flaming torch.

The man who held Excalibur stood motionless, squinting against the brilliance of his own weapon, feeling the power that had once gone coursing through Arthur Pendragon's veins flooding his own. The white blaze of Cut-Steel routed the shadows of the room. Bleys slipped down from his stool and knelt, head bowed to that strong pale fire.

There was utter silence.

Then Morgan said: "You have come again, my enemy. No magic of mine has power over you now. The lake is no longer a prison for you. Your star rises. The sword Excalibur is drawn again to save England, and it will not fail." Her calm voice deepened a little, revengefully. "But you will not live to take joy in your triumph, Arthur, my enemy! The touch of Excalibur's hilt is as deadly as the touch of its blade. When all is won, on some dark tomorrow, you shall die."

The sword was a flame of living light. The man who held it did not answer for a moment. Then—

"Yes," he said, very softly. "But you shall die today."

He moved forward.

THE END.

THE KA OF KOR-SETHON

by Hannes Bok

I am man-shaped, but small—
real though unreal,
like a cobweb doll—
locked here in this gloom
by charm-painted walls
around which I steal,
raising my call,
a ka in a tomb.

On glided trestles a mummy case
holds the body that once I wore,
nothing now but a shriveled husk
which I must guard forevermore.
Sometimes I sit by the painted face
that stares unblinking up at dusk.

Or else I play with shapes of clay
left to feed this afterlife;
small wooden boats on a blue-ink river,
tiny darts in a toy soldier's quiver,
mud-food served by a mud-made wife,
a model house where I may stay—
but there is no joy in them, for they
give no response to my loneliness.

So I flit about, recalling stars
that I loved above the desert sands,
spicy winds which seemed to bless,
and yellow sunlight on the Nile.
I long to break up from this vault,
glad of the pain of another birth,
to touch green things fresh from moist earth,
and know the bliss of a woman's smile,
a sense of might from a sword in my hands,
the wine of Right, the flame of Fault.

But the hieroglyphs are prisoning bars
holding me where it is drab and dreary.
There is no sympathy, no mirth,
none but myself—and I am weary.

THIEVES' HOUSE

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

● Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were caught in the house that was headquarters for the guild of thieves and murderers—but it was not those men that caused their deepest fear. There were other beings in that place.

Illustrated by Kramer

"What's the use of knowing the *name* of a skull? One would never have occasion to talk to it," said the fat thief, smirking. "What interests *me* is that it has rubies for eyes."

"Yet it is written here that its name is Ohmphal," replied the black-bearded thief, who was in authority.

"Let me see," said the red-haired wench, leaning over his shoulder. Together the three of them read the cryptic runes:

Item: the skull Ohmphal, of the Master Thief Ohmphal, with great ruby eyes; and one pair of jeweled hands. *History of item:* the skull Ohmphal was stolen from the Thieves' Guild by the priests of Votishal and placed by them in the crypt of their accursed temple. *Instructions:* the skull Ohmphal is to be recovered at the earliest opportunity, that it may be given proper veneration in the Thieves' Sepulcher. *Difficulties:* the lock of the door leading to the crypt is reputed to be beyond the cunning of any thief to pick. *Warnings:* within the crypt is rumored to be a guardian beast of terrible ferocity.

"Those crabbed letters are devilish hard to read," said the red-haired wench, frowning.

"And no wonder, for they were written centuries ago," said the black-bearded thief.

"Where did you find this parchment?" she asked.

"Beneath the false bottom of a moldering chest in our storerooms," he replied.

"By the gods who are not!" chuckled the fat thief, still pouring over the parchment, "but the Thieves' Guild must have been superstitious in those ancient days! To think of wasting jewels on a mere skull. If we ever get hold of Master Ohmphal, *we'll* venerate him—by changing his ruby eyes into good hard money!"

"Aye!" said the black-bearded thief, "And it was just that matter I wanted to talk to you about, Fissif—the getting hold of Ohmphal."

"Oh, but there are—difficulties, as you, Krovas our master, must surely know," said the fat thief, quickly singing another tune. "Even today, after the passage of centuries, men still shudder when they speak of the crypt of Votishal, with its lock and its beast. There is no one in the Thieves' Guild who can—"

"No one in the Thieves' Guild, that's true!" interrupted the black-bearded thief sharply. "But—" and here his voice began to go low—"there are those *outside* the Thieves' Guild who can. Have you heard that there is recently returned here to Lankhmar a certain rogue and picklock known as the Gray Mouser? And with him a huge barbarian who goes by the name of Fafhrd, but is sometimes called The Beast-Slayer? That pair commonly hunts alone—yet if you were to approach them with this tempting suggestion—"

"But Master," interposed the fat thief, "in that case, they would demand at least two thirds of the profits."

"Exactly!" said the black-bearded thief, with a sudden flash of cold humor. The red-haired wench caught his meaning, and laughed aloud. "Exactly! And that is just the reason why I have chosen you, Fissif, the smoothest of double-crossers, to undertake this business."

The ten remaining days of the Month of the Serpent had passed, and the first fifteen days of the Month of the Owl, since those three had conferred. And the fifteenth day had darkened into night. Chill fog, like a shroud, hugged ancient stony Lankhmar, chief city of an ancient barbaric world. This night the fog had come earlier than usual, flowing down the twisting streets and mazy alleyways. And it was getting thicker.

In one street rather narrower and more silent than the rest, a square of yellow torchlight shone from a wide doorway in a vast and rambling house of stone. There was something ominous in a single open door in a street where all other doors were barred against the darkness and the damp. People avoided this street at night. And there was reason for their fear. The house had a bad reputation. People said it was the den in which the thieves of Lankhmar gathered to plot and palaver and settle their private bickerings, the headquarters from which Krovas, the reputed Master Thief, issued his orders—in short, the meeting place of the formidable Thieves' Guild of Lankhmar.

But now a man came hurrying along this street, every now and then looking apprehensively over his shoulder. He was a fat man, and he hobbled a little, as if he had recently ridden hard and far. He carried a tarnished and ancient-looking copper box of about the size to contain a human head. He paused in the doorway and uttered a certain password—seemingly to the empty air, for the long hall ahead of him was empty. But a voice from a point inside and *above* the doorway answered, "Pass, Fissif. Krovas awaits you in his room." And the fat one said, "They follow me close—you know the two I mean." And the voice replied, "We are ready for them." And the fat one hurried down the hall.

For a considerable time, then, there was nothing but silence and the thickening fog. Finally a faint warning whistle came from somewhere down the street. It was repeated closer by and answered from inside the doorway.

Then, from the same direction as the first whistle, came the tread of feet, growing louder. It sounded as if there were only one person, but the effulgence of the light from the door showed that there was also a little man, who walked softly, a little man clad in close-fitting garments of gray—tunic, jerkin, mouseskin cap and cloak.

His companion was rangy and copper-haired, obviously a northern barbarian from the distant lands of the Cold Waste. His tunic was rich brown, his cloak green. There was considerable leather about him—wristbands, headband, boots, and a wide tight-laced belt. Fog had wet the leather and misted the brass studding it. As they entered the square of light before the doorway, a frown furrowed his broad wide forehead. His green eyes glanced quickly from side to side. Putting his hand on the little man's shoulder, he whispered:

"I don't like the looks of this, Gray Mouser."

"Tch! The place always looks like this," retorted the Gray Mouser sharply, his mobile lips and pug nose sneering, and his dark eyes blazing. "They just do it to scare the populace. Come on, Fafhrd! We're not going to let that misbegotten, double-dealing Fissif escape after the way he cheated us."

"I know all that, my angry little weasel," the barbarian replied, tugging the Mouser back. "And the idea of Fissif escaping displeases me. But putting my bare neck in a trap displeases me more. Remember, they whistled."

"Tch! They always whistle. They like to be mysterious. I know these thieves, Fafhrd. I've known them all my life. Come on."

The big man shrugged his shoulders and started forward.

"On second thought," whispered the Mouser, "there may be something to what you say." And he slipped a dirk from his belt.

Fafhrd showed white teeth in a grin and slowly pulled a big-pommeled longsword from its well-oiled scabbard.

"A rotten weapon for infighting," murmured the Mouser sardonically.

Warily now they approached the door, each taking a side and sticking close to the wall. Holding the grip of his sword low, the point high, ready to strike in any direction, Fafhrd entered. The Mouser was a little ahead of him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something snakelike dropping down at the Mouser's head from above, and struck at it quickly with his sword. This flipped it toward him and he caught it with his free hand. It was a strangler's noose. He gave it a sudden sidewise heave and the man gripping the other end toppled out from a ledge above. For an instant he seemed to hang suspended in the air, a dark-skinned rogue with long black hair and a greasy tunic of red leather worked with gold thread. As Fafhrd deliberately raised his sword, he saw that the Mouser was lunging across the corridor at him, dirk in hand. For a moment he thought the Mouser had gone mad. But the Mouser's dirk missed him by a hairbreadth and *another* blade whipped by him from behind.

The Mouser had seen a trapdoor open in the floor beside Fafhrd and a bald-headed thief shoot up, sword in hand. After deflecting the blow aimed at his companion, the Mouser slammed the trapdoor back and had the satisfaction of catching with it the blade of the sword and two lefthand fingers of the ducking thief. All three were broken and the muted yowl from below was impressive. Fafhrd's man, spitted on the longsword, was quite dead.

From the street came several whistles and the sound of men moving in.

"They've cut us off!" snapped the Mouser. "Our best chance lies ahead. We'll make for Krovas' room. Fissif may be there. Follow me!"

And he darted down the corridor and up a winding stair, Fafhrd following him close at heel. At the fourth level they left the stair, made right and left turns at spots where dimly-lit corridors intersected, then raced for a doorway from which yellow light shone.

It puzzled the Mouser that they had met with no interference. His sharp ears no longer caught sounds of pursuit. On the threshold he pulled up quickly, so that Fafhrd collided with him.

It was a large room with several alcoves. Like the rest of the building, the floor and walls were of smooth dark stone, unembellished. It was lit by four earthenware lamps set at random on a heavy cyprus table. Behind the table sat a richly-robed, black-bearded man, seemingly staring down in extreme astonishment at a copper box and a litter of smaller objects, his hands gripping the table edge. But they had no time to consider his odd motionlessness and still odder complexion, for their attention was immediately riveted on the red-haired wench who stood beside him.

As she sprang back like a startled cat, Fafhrd pointed at what she held under one arm and cried, "Look Mouser, the skull! The skull and the hands!"

Clasped in her slim arm was indeed a brownish, ancient-looking skull, curiously banded with gold, from whose eye sockets great rubies sparkled and whose teeth were diamonds and blackened pearls. And in her white hand were gripped two neat packets of bones, tipped with a golden gleam and reddish sparkle. Even as Fafhrd spoke she turned and ran toward the largest alcove, her lithe legs outlined against silken garments. Fafhrd and the Mouser rushed after her. They saw she was heading for a small low doorway. Entering the alcove her free hand shot out and gripped a cord hanging from the ceiling. Not pausing, swinging lithely at the hips, she gave it a tug. Folds of thick, weighted velvet fell down behind her. The Mouser and Fafhrd plunged into them and floundered. It was the Mouser who got through first, wriggling under. He saw an oblong of faint light narrowing ahead of him, sprang for it, grabbed at the block of stone sinking into the low doorway, then jerked his hand back with a curse and sucked at bruised fingers. The stone panel closed with a slight grating noise.

Fafhrd lifted the thick folds of velvet on his broad shoulders as if they were a great cloak. Light from the main room flooded into the alcove and revealed a closely mortised stone wall of uniform appearance. The Mouser started to dig the point of his dirk into a crack, then desisted.

"Pah! I know these doors! They're either worked from the other side or else by distant levers. She's gotten clear away and the skull with her."

He continued to suck the fingers that had come so near to being crushed, wondering superstitiously if his breaking of the thief's fingers had been a kind of warning or omen.

"We forget Krovas," said Fafhrd suddenly, lifting the drapes with his hand and looking back over his shoulder.

But the black-bearded man had not moved or taken any notice of the commotion. As they approached him slowly they saw that his face was bluish-purple under the swarthy skin, and that his eyes bulged not from astonishment, but from strangulation. Fafhrd lifted the oily, well-combed beard and saw cruel indentations on the throat, seeming more like those of claws than

fingers. The Mouser examined the things on the table. There were a number of jeweler's instruments, their ivory handles stained deep yellow from long use. He scooped up some small objects.

"Krovas had already pried three of the finger-jewels loose and several of the teeth," he remarked, showing Fafhrd three rubies, and a number of pearls and diamonds, which glittered on his palm.

Fafhrd nodded and again lifted Krovas' beard, frowning at the indentations, which were beginning to deepen in color.

"I wonder who the woman was?" said the Mouser. "No thief is permitted to bring a woman here on pain of death. Krovas' mistress, likely. The Master Thief has special powers and can take chances."

"The Master Thief is dead," muttered Fafhrd.

Then the Mouser awoke to their situation. He had half-formulated a plan of effecting an escape from the Thieves' House by capturing and threatening Krovas. But a dead man could not be effectively intimidated. As he started to speak to Fafhrd they caught the murmur of several voices and the sound of approaching footsteps. Without deliberation they retired into the alcove, the Mouser cutting a small slit in the drapes at eye level and Fafhrd doing the same.

They heard someone say, "Yes, the two of them got clean away, damn their luck! We found the alley door open."

The first thief to enter was paunchy, white-faced, and obviously frightened. The Gray Mouser and Fafhrd immediately recognized him as Fissif. Pushing him along roughly was a tall, expressionless fellow with heavy arms and big hands. The Mouser knew him, too—Slevyas, the Tight-lipped, Krovas' chief lieutenant. About a dozen others filed into the room and took up positions near the walls. Veteran thieves all, with a considerable sprinkling of scars, pockmarks, and other mutilations, including two black-patched eye sockets. They were somewhat wary and ill at ease, held daggers and shortswords ready, and all stared intently at the strangled man.

"So Krovas is truly dead," said Slevyas, shoving Fissif forward. "At least that much of your story is true."

"Dead as a fish," echoed a thief who had moved closer to the table. "Now we've got us a better master. We'll have no more of black-beard and his red-haired wench."

"Shut your teeth, rat, before I break them!" Slevyas whipped out the words coldly and in a level tone.

"But *you* are our master now," replied the thief in a surprised voice.

"Yes, I'm the master of all of you, unquestioned master, and my first piece of advice is this: to criticize a dead thief is not only irreverent—it is also a waste of time. Now, Fissif, where's the jeweled skull? We all know it's more valuable than a year's pickpocketing, and that the Thieves' Guild needs gold. So, no nonsense!"

The Mouser peering cautiously from his slit, grinned at the look of piteous fear on Fissif's fat-jowled face.

"The skull, master?" said Fissif in a quavering sepulchral tone. "Why it's gone back to the grave from which we three filched it. It has flown back by supernatural powers, and the hands with it. Surely if those bony hands could strangle Krovas, as I saw with my own eyes, there would be no difficulty about the other thing."

The Mouser could hardly repress a gasp of amazement. Slevyas slapped Fissif across the face.

"You lie! you quaking bag of mush! I will tell you what happened. You plotted with those two rogues, the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd. You thought no one would suspect you because you double-crossed them according to instructions. But you planned a double-double-cross. You helped them escape the trap we had set, let them kill Krovas, and then assured their escape by starting a panic with your tale of dead fingers killing Krovas. You thought you could brazen it out."

"But master," Fissif pleaded, "with my own eyes I saw the skeletal fingers leap to his throat. They were angry with him because he had pried forth some of the jewels that were their nails and—"

Another slap changed his statement to a whining grunt.

"A fool's story," sneered a scrawny thief. "How could the bones hold together?"

"They were laced on brass wires," returned Fissif in meek tones.

"Nah! And I suppose the hands, after strangling Krovas, picked up the skull and carried it away with them?" suggested another thief. Several sniggered. Slevyas silenced them with a look, then indicated Fissif with his thumb.

"Pinion him," he ordered.

Two thieves sidled up to Fissif, who offered no resistance. They twisted his arms behind his back.

"We'll do this thing decently," said Slevyas, seating himself on the table. "Thieves' Trial. Everything in order. Briefly this is a matter for the Thieves' Jury to consider. Fissif, cutpurse of the first rank, was commissioned to loot the sacred grave at the temple of Votishal of one skull and one pair of hands. Because of certain unusual difficulties involved, Fissif was ordered to league himself with two outsiders of special

talent, to wit, the northern barbarian Fafhrd and the notorious Gray Mouser."

The Mouser made a courteous and formal bow behind the drapes, then glued his eye once more to the slit.

"The loot obtained, Fissif was to steal it from the two others—and at the earliest possible moment, to avoid their stealing it from him."

The Mouser thought he heard Fafhrd smother a curse and grit his teeth.

"If possible, Fissif was to slay them," concluded Slevyas. "In any case he was to bring the loot direct to Krovas. So much for Fissif's instructions, as detailed to me by Krovas. Now tell your story, Fissif, but—mind you—no old-wives' tales."

"Brother thieves," began Fissif in a heavy mournful voice. This was greeted by several derisive cries. Slevyas rapped carelessly for order.

"I followed out those instructions just as they were given me," continued Fissif. "I sought out Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and interested them in the plan. I agreed to share the loot equally with them, a third to each man."

Fafhrd, squinting at Fissif through the drape, nodded his head solemnly. Fissif then made several uncomplimentary remarks about Fafhrd and the Mouser, evidently hoping thereby to convince his listeners that he had not plotted with them. The other thieves only smiled grimly.

"And when it came to the actual filching of the loot from the temple," Fissif went on, gaining confidence from the sound of his own voice, "it turned out I had little need of their help."

Again Fafhrd smothered a curse. He could hardly endure listening in silence to such outrageous lies. But the Mouser enjoyed it after a fashion.

"This is an unwise time to brag," interjected Slevyas. "You know very well that the Mouser's cunning was needed in picking the great triple lock, and that the guardian beast could not easily have been slain but for the Northerner."

Fafhrd was somewhat mollified by this. Fissif became humble again and bowed his head in assent. The thieves began gradually to close in on him.

"And so," he finished in a kind of panic, "I took up the loot while they slept, and spurred on to Lankhmar. I dared not slay them, for fear the killing of one would awaken the other. I brought the loot direct to Krovas, who complimented me and began to pry out the gems. There lies the copper box which held the skull and hands." He pointed at the table. "And as for what happened afterwards,"—he paused, wet his lips, looked around fearfully, then added in a small despairing voice—"it happened just as I told you before."

The thieves, snarling disbelief, closed in, but Slevyas halted them with a peremptory rap. He seemed to be considering something.

Another thief darted into the room, saluted Slevyas. "Master," he panted, "Moolsh, stationed on the roof opposite the alley door, has just reported that, though open all night, no one either entered or left. The two intruders may still be here!"

Slevyas' start as he received the news was almost imperceptible. He stared at his informant. Then slowly and as if drawn by instinct, his impassive face turned until his pale, small eyes rested upon the heavy drapes curtaining the alcove. As he was about to give an order, the drapes bellied out as if with a great gust of wind. They swung forward and up until almost level with the ceiling, and he glimpsed two figures racing forward. The tall, copper-haired barbarian was aiming a blow at him.

With a suppleness which belied his large frame, Slevyas half-ducked, half-dropped, and the great longsword bit deep into the table against which he had been resting. From the floor he saw his underlings springing back in confusion, one staggered by a blow. Fissif, quicker-nerved than the rest because he knew his life was at stake in more ways than one, snatched and hurled a dagger. It was an imperfect throw, traveling pommel-forward. But it was accurate. Slevyas saw it take the tall barbarian on the side of the head as he rushed through the doorway, seeming to stagger him. Then Slevyas was on his feet, sword drawn and organizing pursuit. In a few moments the room was empty, save for dead Krovas staring at an empty copper box in a cruel mockery of astonishment.

The Gray Mouser knew the layout of the Thieves' House—not as well as the palm of his hand, but well enough—and he led Fafhrd along a bewildering route. They careened around stony angles, sprang up and down small sets of steps, two or three each, which made it difficult to determine which level they were on. The Mouser had drawn his slim sword Scalpel for the first time and used it to knock over the candles they passed, and to make swipes at the wall torches, hoping thereby to confuse the pursuit, whose whistles sounded sharply from behind them. Twice Fafhrd stumbled and recovered himself.

Two half-dressed apprentice thieves stuck their heads out of a door. The Mouser slammed it in their inquiring, excited faces, then sprang down a curving stairway. He was heading for a third exit he surmised would be poorly guarded.

"If we are separated, let our rendezvous be the Silver Eel," he said in a quick aside to Fafhrd, mentioning a tavern they frequented.

The Northern nodded. His head was beginning to feel less dizzy now, though it still pained him

considerably. He did not, however, gauge accurately the height of the low arch under which the Mouser sped after descending the equivalent of two levels, and it gave his head as hard a clip as had the dagger. Everything went darkish and whirling before his eyes. He heard the Mouser saying, "This way now! We follow the left-hand wall," and trying to keep a tight hold on his consciousness, he plunged into the narrow corridor down which the Mouser was pointing. He thought the Mouser was following him.

But the Mouser had waited a moment too long. True, the main pursuit was still out of sight, but a watchman whose duty it was to patrol this passage, hearing the whistles, had returned hurriedly from a friendly game of dice. The Mouser ducked as the artfully-cast noose settled around his neck, but not quite soon enough. It tightened cruelly against ear, cheek, and jawbone, and brought him down. In the next instant Scalpel severed the cord, but that gave the watchman time to get out his sword. For a few perilous moments the Mouser fought him from the floor, warding off a flashing point that came close enough to his nose to make him cross-eyed. Watching his chance, he scrambled to his feet, rushed his man back a dozen paces with a whirlwind attack in which Scalpel seemed to become three or four swords, and ended the man's cries for help with a slicing thrust through the neck.

The delay was sufficient. As the Mouser wrenched away the noose from his cheek and mouth, where it had half gagged him during the fight, he saw the first of Slevyas' crowd dart out under the archway. Abruptly the Mouser made off down the main corridor, away from the path of escape Fafhrd had taken. A half dozen plans flashed through his mind. There came a triumphant outcry as Slevyas' crowd sighted him, then a number of whistles from ahead. He decided his best chance was to make for the roof, and whirled into a cross corridor. He was certain Fafhrd had escaped, though the Northerner's behavior bothered him vaguely. He was supremely confident that he, the Gray Mouser, could elude ten times as many thieves as now careened and skidded

through the mazy corridors of the Thieves' House. He lengthened his skipping stride, and his soft-shod feet fairly flew over the well-worn stone.

Fafhrd, lost in pitch darkness for he didn't know how long, steadied himself against what felt like a table and tried to remember how he had gotten so grievously far astray. But his skull throbbed and kept tightening with pain, and the incidents he recalled were jumbled up, with gaps in between. There was a matter of sprawling down a stair and of pushing against a wall of carven stone which had given way silently and let him tumble through. At one point he had been violently sick and at another he must have been unconscious for some time, for he recalled pushing himself up from a prone position and crawling for some distance on hands and knees through a jumble of casks and bales of rotten cloth. That he had banged his head at least once more he was certain; pushing his fingers through his tangled, sweaty locks he could detect as many as three distinct lumps in his scalp. His chief emotion was a dull and persistent anger directed at the heavy masses of stone around him. His primitive imagination half-invested them with a conscious intent to oppose him and block him off whichever way he moved. He knew that he had somehow confused the Mouser's simple directions. Just which wall was it the little gray man had told him to follow? The right? And just where was the Mouser? In some fearful mix-up likely.

If only the air weren't so hot and dry, he felt he'd be able to think things out better. Nothing seemed to agree. Even the quality of the air didn't fit with his impression that he had been descending most of the way, as if into a deep cellar. It should have been cold, and damp with fog, but it wasn't. He slid his hand along the wooden surface on which it was resting, and soft dust piled up between his fingers. That, along with the impenetrable darkness and total silence, would seem to indicate he was in a region of the Thieves' House long disused. He brooded for a moment over his memories of the stone crypt from which he and the Mouser and Fissif had filched the jeweled skull. The fine dust, rising to his nostrils, made him sneeze, and that started him moving again. His groping hand found a wall. He tried to recall the direction from which he had originally approached the table, but was unable to, and so started out at random toward the right. He moved along slowly, feeling his way, hand and foot.

His caution saved him. One of the stones seemed to give slightly under his exploring foot and he stopped dead. Abruptly there came a rasping sound followed by a clank and two muffled thuds. The air in front of his face was disturbed. He waited a moment, then groped forward cautiously through the blackness. His hand encountered a strip of rusty metal at shoulder level. Feeling along it gingerly he found it protruded from a crevice in the left wall, and ended in a point a few inches from a wall he now discovered to be on his right. Further groping revealed a similar blade a little ways below the first. He now realized that the thudding sounds had been caused by counterweights, which, released by pressure on the stone, had automatically propelled the blades through the crevice. Another step forward and he would have been transfixed, like a roast on a spit. He reached for his longsword, found it was not in the scabbard, so took the scabbard instead and with it broke off the two blades close to the wall. Then he turned and retraced his steps to the dust-covered table.

But a slow tracing of the wall beyond the table led him back to the corridor of the sword blades. He shook his aching head and cursed angrily because he had no light nor way of making fire. How then? Had he originally entered this blind alley by way of the corridor, missing the deadly stone by pure luck? That seemed to be the only answer, so with a growl he started off again down the corridor of the sword blades, arms outstretched and hands brushing the two walls, so that he might know when he came to an intersection. After a little it occurred to him that he might have fallen into the chamber behind from some entrance part way up the wall, but stubbornness kept him from turning back a second time.

The next thing his exploring foot encountered was an emptiness, which turned out to be the beginning of a flight of stone steps leading down. At that point he gave up trying to remember just how he had gotten where he was. About twenty steps down his nostrils caught a musty, arid odor welling up from below. Another twenty steps and he began comparing it to the odor he found in certain ancient desert sepulchers of the Eastern Lands. There was an almost imperceptible spiciness to it, a dead spiciness. His skin felt hot and dry. He drew his long knife from his belt and moved silently, slowly.

At the fifty-third step the stair ended and the side walls retreated. From the feel of the air, he thought he must be in a large chamber. He advanced a little way, his boots scuffing a thick carpet of fine dust. There was a dry flapping and faint rattling in the air above his head. Twice something small and hard brushed his cheek. He remembered bat-infested caves into which he had previously ventured. But these tiny noises, though in many ways similar, were not quite like those of bats. The short hairs prickled on the back of his neck. He strained his eyes, but saw only the meaningless pattern of points of light that comes with inky darkness.

Again one of the things brushed his face and this time he was ready for it. His big hands grabbed swiftly—and then nearly dropped what they clutched, for it was dry and weightless, a mere framework of tiny brittle bones which cracked under his fingers. His finger and thumb encountered a minute animal skull.

His mind fought down the idea of bats which were skeletons and yet flapped to and fro in a great tomblike chamber. Surely this creature must have died hanging to the roof above his head, and his entrance dislodged it! But he did not grasp again at the faint rattling noises in the air.

Then he began to sense sounds of another sort—diminutive shrill squeaks almost too high for the ear to catch. Whatever they were, real or imagined, there was that about them which bred panic, and Fafhrd found himself shouting: "Speak to me! What are you whining and tittering about? Reveal yourselves!"

At this, echoes cried faintly back to him, and he knew for certain he was in a large chamber. Then there was silence, even the sounds in the air receding. And after the silence had endured for twenty or more beats of Fafhrd's pounding heart, it was broken in a way Fafhrd did not like.

A faint, high, listless voice came from somewhere ahead of him, saying, "The man is a northerner, brothers, a long-haired, uncouth barbarian from the Cold Waste."

From a spot a little ways to one side a similar voice responded, "In our days we met many of his breed at the docks. We soused them with drink, and stole gold dust from their pouches. We were mighty thieves in our day, matchless in craft and cunning."

And a third—"See, he has lost his sword, and look, brothers, he has crushed a bat and holds it in his hand."

Fafhrd's shout to the effect that this was all nonsense and mummery died before it reached his lips, for it suddenly occurred to him to wonder how these creatures could tell his appearance and even see what he held in his hand, when it was pitch dark. Fafhrd knew well that even the cat and the owl are blind in complete darkness. A crawling terror took hold of him.

"But the skull of a bat is not the skull of a man," came what seemed to be the first voice. "He is one of the three who stole back our brother's skull from the temple of Votishal. Yet he has not brought the skull with him."

"For centuries our brother's jeweled head has languished lonely under the accursed fane of Votishal," spoke a fourth. "And now that those above have stolen him back, they do not mean to return him to us. They would tear out his glittering eyes and sell them for greasy coins. They are puny thieves, godless and greedy. They have forgotten us, their ancient brothers, and are evil entirely."

There was something horribly dead and faraway about the voices, as if they formed in a void. Something emotionless and yet strangely sad and strangely menacing, halfway between a faint, hopeless sigh and a fainter, icy laugh. Fafhrd clenched his hands tight, so that the tiny skeleton crackled to fragments. He tried to rally his courage and move forward, but could not.

"It is not fitting that such ignoble fate befall our brother," came the first voice, which held the barest suggestion of authority over the others. "Hearken now, Northerner, to our words, and hearken well."

"See, brothers," broke in the second, "the Northerner is afraid, and wipes his mouth with his great hand, and gnaws his knuckle in uncertainty and fear."

Fafhrd began to tremble at hearing his actions so minutely described. Long-buried terrors rose in his mind. He remembered his earliest thoughts of death, how as a boy he had first witnessed the terrible funeral rites of the Cold Waste, and joined in muted prayers to Kos and the nameless god of doom. Then, for the first time, he thought he could distinguish something in the darkness. It might only have been a peculiar formation of the meaningless pattern of light, but he seemed to distinguish a number of sparkling points on a level with his own head, all in pairs about a thumb's-length apart. Some seemed deep red, and some green, and some pale-blue like sapphires. He vividly recalled the ruby eyes of the skull stolen from Votishal, the skull Fissif averred had strangled Krovas with bony hands. The points of light seemed to be gathering together and moving toward him, very slowly.

"Northerner," continued the first voice, "know that we are the ancient master thieves of Lankhmar, and that we needs must have the lost skull of our brother Ohmphal. You must bring it to us before the stars of midnight next shine overhead. Else you will be sought out and your life drawn from you."

The pairs of colored light were still closing in, and now Fafhrd thought he could hear the sound of dry, grating footsteps in the dust. He recalled the deep, purple indentations on the throat of Krovas.

"You must bring the skull without fail," echoed the second voice.

"Before next midnight," came another.

"The jewels must be in the skull; not one must be held back from us."

"Ohmphal our brother shall return."

"If you fail us," whispered the first voice, "we shall come for you."

And then they seemed to be all around him, crying out "Ohmphal—Ohmphal," in those detestable voices which were still not one whit louder or less faraway. Fafhrd thrust out his hands convulsively, touched something hard and smooth and dry. And with that he shook and started like a frightened horse, turned and ran off at full speed, came to a painful, stumbling stop against the stone steps, and raced up them three at a time, stumbling, and bruising his elbows against the walls.

The fat thief Fissif wandered about disconsolately in a large low cellar-chamber, dimly lighted, littered with odds and ends and piled with empty casks and bales of rotten cloth. He chewed a mildly soporific nut which stained his lips blue and dribbled down his flabby jaws; at regular intervals he sighed in self-pity. He realized his prospects in the Thieves' Guild were rather dubious, even though Slevyas had granted him a kind of reprieve. He recalled the fishy look in Slevyas' eye, and shivered. He did not like the loneliness of the cellar-chamber, but anything was preferable to the contemptuous, threatening glances of his brother thieves.

The sound of dragging footsteps caused him to swallow one of his monotonous sighs—his chew along with it—and duck behind a bale. There appeared from the shadows a startling apparition. Fissif recognized it as the Northerner, Fafhrd, but it was a very sorry-looking Fafhrd, face pale and grimy, clothes and hair bedraggled and smeared with a grayish dust. He moved like a man bewildered or deep in thought. Fissif, realizing that here indeed was a golden opportunity, picked up a sizable tapestry-weight that was lying at hand, and stole softly after the brooding figure.

Fafhrd had just about convinced himself that the strange voices from which he had fled were only the figments of his brain, fostered by fever and headache. After all, he reasoned, a blow on the head often made a person see colored lights and hear high ringing noises; he must have been almost witless to get lost in the dark so readily—the ease with which he'd retraced his path this time proved that. The thing to do now was to concentrate on escaping from this musty den. He mustn't dream. There was a houseful of thieves on the lookout for him, and he might expect to meet one at any turn.

As he shook his head to clear it, and gazed up alertly, there descended on his thick skull the sixth blow it had received that night. But this one was harder.

Slevyas' reaction to the news of Fafhrd's capture was not exactly what Fissif had expected. He did not smile. He did not look up from the platter of cold meats set before him. He merely took a small swallow of pale-yellow wine and went on eating.

"The jeweled skull?" he questioned curtly, between mouthfuls.

Fissif explained that it was possible the Northerner had hidden or lost it somewhere in the lower reaches of the cellars. A careful search would answer the question. "Perhaps the Gray Mouser was carrying it—"

"You killed the Northerner?" asked Slevyas after a pause.

"Not quite," answered Fissif proudly. "But I joggled his brains for him."

Fissif expected a compliment at this, or at least a friendly nod, but received instead a cold, appraising stare, the import of which was difficult to determine. Slevyas thoroughly masticated a mouthful of meat, swallowed it, then took a deliberate swallow of wine. All the while his eyes did not leave Fissif.

Finally he said, "Had you killed him, you would at this instant be put to torture. Understand, fat-belly, that I do not trust you. Too many things point to your complicity. If you had plotted with him, you would have killed him to prevent your treason being revealed. Perhaps you did try to kill him. Fortunate for you his skull is thick."

The matter-of-fact tone stifled Fissif's protest. Slevyas drained the last of his cup, leaned back, and signed for the apprentices to take the dishes away.

"Has the Northerner regained his senses?" he asked abruptly.

Fissif nodded, and added, "He seemed to be in a fever. Struggled against his bonds and muttered words. Something about 'Next Midnight'. He repeated that three times. The rest was in an outlandish tongue."

A scrawny, rat-eared thief entered. "Master," he said bowing obsequiously, "we have found the Gray Mouser. He sits at the Silver Eel Tavern. Several of ours watch the place. Shall he be captured or slain?"

"Had he the skull with him? Or a box that might hide it?"

"No, master," responded the thief lugubriously, bowing even lower than before.

Slevyas sat for a moment in thought, then motioned an apprentice to bring writing materials. He wrote a few lines, then threw a question to Fissif.

"What were the words the Northerner muttered?"

" 'Next Midnight', master," answered Fissif, becoming obsequious himself.

"They will fit nicely," said Slevyas, smiling thinly as if at an irony only he could perceive. His pen moved on over the stiff parchment.

The Gray Mouser sat with his back to the wall behind a tankard-dented, wine-stained table at the Silver Eel, nervously rolling between finger and thumb one of the rubies he had taken from under the eyes of dead Krovas. His small cup of wine of bitter herbs was still half full. He suffered from the unpleasant sensation that he was being watched. His glance flitted restlessly around the almost empty room and back and forth between the four small window spaces, high in the wall, that let in the chill fog. He gazed narrowly at the fat, leather-aproned innkeeper who snored dismally on a stool beside the short stair leading up to the door. He listened with half an ear to the disjointed, somnolent mumbling of the two soldiers across the room, who clutched large tankards and, heads leaned together in drunken confidentialness, tried to tell each other of ancient strategems and mighty marches.

Why didn't Fafhrd come? This was no time for the huge fellow to be late, yet since the Mouser's arrival at the Silver Eel, the candles had melted down half an inch. The Mouser no longer found pleasure in recalling the perilous stages of his escape from the Thieves' House—the dash up the stairs, the leaping from roof to roof, the short fight among the chimneys. By the Gods of Trouble! Would he have to go back to that den, now filled with ready knives and open eyes, to begin search for his companion? He snapped his fingers so that the jewel between them shot high toward the sooty ceiling, a little track of sparkling red which his other hand snatched back as it descended, like a lizard trapping a fly. Again he stared suspiciously at the slumped, open-mouthed innkeeper.

From the corner of his eye he saw the small steel messenger streaking down toward him from a fog-dim rectangle of window. Instinctively he jerked to one side. But there was no need. The dagger buried its point in the table top an arm's length to one side. For what seemed a long time the Mouser stood tense, poised, ready for anything. The hollow, smacking noise of the impact had not awakened the innkeeper nor disturbed the soldiers, one of whom now snored, too. Then the Mouser's left hand reached out and rocked the dagger loose. He slipped the small role of parchment from the blade, and, still keeping his gaze near the windows, read in snatches the harshly-drawn runes of Lankhmar.

Their import was this. "If you bring not the jeweled skull to what was Krovas' and is now Slevyas' chamber by next midnight, we will begin to kill the Northerner."

Again next night the fog crept early into Lankhmar. Sounds were muffled and torches ringed with smoky halos. But it was not yet late, although midnight was nearing, and the streets were filled with hurrying shopkeepers and craftsmen, and drinkers happily laughing from their first cups, and sailors new on leave ogling the shopgirls.

In the street next that on which stood the

Thieves' House—the Street of the Silk Merchants, it was called—the crowd was thinning. The merchants were shutting shop. Occasionally they exchanged the noisy greetings of business rivals and plied shrewd questions pertaining to the state of trade. Several of them looked curiously at a narrow stone building, overshadowed by the dark mass of the Thieves' House, and from whose slitlike upper windows warm light shone. There dwelt, with servants and hired bodyguard, one Ivlis, a handsome red-haired wench who sometimes danced for the overlords, and who was treated with respect, not so much for that reason, but because it was said that she was the mistress of the Master of the Thieves' Guild, to whom the silk merchants paid tribute. But that very day rumor had whispered that the old master was dead and a new one taken his place. There was speculation among the silk merchants as to whether Ivlis was now out of favor and had shut herself up in fear.

A little old woman came hobbling along, her crooked cane feeling for the cracks between the slick cobblestones. Because she had a black cloak huddled around her and a black, cowllike bonnet on her head, one of the merchants almost collided with her in the shadows. He helped her around a slimy puddle and grinned commiseratingly when she complained in a quavering voice about the condition of the street and the manifold dangers to which an old woman was exposed. She went off mumbling to herself in a rather senile fashion, "Come on now, it's just a little farther, just a little farther. Old bones are brittle, brittle."

A loutish apprentice dyer came ambling along, bumped into her rudely, and walked on without looking back to see whether she had fallen. But he had not taken two steps before a well-planted kick jarred his spine. He whirled around clumsily but saw only the bent old form tottering off, cane tapping uncertainly. Eyes and mouth wide open, he moved back several steps, scratching his head in utter bewilderment not unmixed with superstitious wonder. Later that night he gave half his wages to his old mother.

The old woman paused before the house of Ivlis, peered up at the lighted windows several times as if she were in doubt and her eyesight bad, then climbed up laboriously to the door and feebly waggled her cane against it. After a pause she rapped again, and cried out in a fretful, high voice: "Let me in. Let me in. I bear news from the gods to the dweller in this house. You inside there, let me in!"

Finally a wicket opened and a gruff, deep voice said, "Go on your way, old witch. None enters here tonight."

But the old woman took no notice of this and repeated stubbornly, "Let me in, I say. I read the future. It's cold in the street and the fog freezes my old throat. Let me in. This noon a bat came flapping and told me of portentous events impending over the dweller in this house. My old eyes can see the shadows of things which are not yet. Let me in, I say."

The slim figure of a woman was silhouetted in the window above the door. After a little it moved away.

The interchange of words between the old woman and the guard went on for some time. Then a soft, husky voice called down the stairwell, "Let the wise woman in. She's alone, isn't she? Then I will talk with her."

The door opened, though not very wide, and the black-cloaked form tottered in. The door was immediately closed and barred.

The Gray Mouser looked around at the three bodyguards standing in the darkened hall, strapping fellows with two shortswords each. They were certainly not of the Thieves' Guild. They seemed ill at ease. He did not forget to wheeze asthmatically, holding his bent side, and thank with a simpering, senile leer the one who opened the door.

The guard drew back with an ill-concealed expression of disgust. The Mouser was not a pretty sight, his face covered with cunningly blended grease and gray ashes, studded with hideous warts of putty, and half covered with wispy gray hair straggling down from the dried scalp of a real witch—so Laavyan the wig seller had averred—that covered his plate.

Slowly the Mouser began to ascend the stair, leaning heavily on the cane and stopping every few steps as if to recover his breath. It was not easy for him to go at such a snaillike pace, what with midnight so near. But he had already failed three times in attempts to enter this well-guarded house, and he knew that the slightest unnatural action might betray him. Before he was halfway up, the husky voice gave a command and a dark-haired serving woman, in a black silk tunic, hurried down, her bare feet making little noise on the stone.

"You're very kind to an old woman," he wheezed, patting the smooth hand which gripped his elbow. They began to move up a little faster. The Mouser's inner core of thought was concentrated on the jeweled skull. He could almost see it wavering in the darkness of the stairwell, a brown ovoid. That skull was the key to the Thieves' House and Fafhrd's safety. Not that Slevyas would be likely to release Fafhrd, even if the skull were brought. But having the skull, the Mouser knew he would be in a position to bargain. Without it, he would have to storm Slevyas' lair with every thief forewarned and ready for him. Last night luck and circumstance had fought on his side. It would not happen again. As these

thoughts were passing through the Mouser's mind he grumbled and whined vaguely about the height of the stair and the stiffness of old joints.

The maid led him into a room strewn with thick-piled rugs and hung wtih silken tapestry. From the ceiling depended on heavy brassy chains a large-bowled copper lamp, intricately engraved, unlit. A soft illumination and a pleasant aromatic odor came from pale-green candles set here and there on little tables which also held tightly-stoppered jars of perfume, small fat-bellied pots of unguent, and the like.

Standing in the center of the room was the red-haired wench he had seen take the skull from Krovas' chamber. Her robe was of white silk. Her gleaming hair, redder than auburn, was held high with golden-headed pins. He had time now to study her face, noting the hardness of her yellow-green eyes and tight jaw, contrasted with her full soft lips and pale creamy skin. He recognized anxiety in the tense lines of her body.

"You read the future, hag?" Her question was more like a command.

"By hand and hair I read it," replied the Mouser, putting an eerie note into his quavering falsetto. "By palm and heart and eye." He tottered toward her. "Yes, and small creatures talk to me and tell me secrets." With that he suddenly drew from under his cloak a small black kitten and almost thrust it into her face. She recoiled in surprise and cried out, but he could see that the action had, in her estimation, established him as a genuine witch.

Ivlis dismissed the maid and the Mouser hastened to follow up his advantage before Ivlis' mood of awe vanished. He spoke of doom and destiny, of omens and portents, of money and love and voyages over water. He played upon the superstitions he knew to be current among the dancing girls of Lankhmar. He impressed her by speaking of "a dark man with a black beard, either recently dead or at death's door," not mentioning the name of Krovas for fear too much accuracy would awaken her suspicion. He wove facts, guesses, and impressive generalities into a web of intricate texture.

The morbid fascination of staring into the forbidden future took hold of her and she leaned forward, breathing rapidly, twisting her slim fingers together, sucking her under lip. Her hurried questions mainly concerned "a cruel, cold-faced, large man," in whom the Mouser recognized Slevyas, and whether or not she should leave Lankhmar.

The Mouser kept up a steady stream of words, only pausing occasionally to cough, wheeze, or cackle for added realism. At times he almost believed that he was indeed a witch and that the things he spoke were dark unholy truths.

But thoughts of Fafhrd and the skull were uppermost in his mind, and he knew that midnight was close at hand. He learned much of Ivlis—for one thing, that she hated Slevyas almost more than she feared him. But the information he most wanted eluded him.

Then the Mouser saw something which stirred him on to greater efforts. Behind Ivlis a gap in the silken hangings showed the wall, and he noted that one of the large paneling stones seemed to be out of place. Suddenly he realized that the stone was of the same size, shape, and quality as that in Krovas' room. This, then, must be the other end of the passage down which Ivlis had escaped. He determined that it would be his means of entry to the Thieves' House, whether he brought the skull or not.

Fearing to waste more time, the Mouser sprang his trick. He paused abruptly, pinched the kitten's tail to make it mew queerly, then sniffed several times, made a hideous face, and said, "Bones! I smell a dead man's bones!"

Ivlis caught her breath and looked up quickly at the large lamp hanging from the ceiling, the lamp which was unlit. The Mouser knew what that glance meant.

But either his own satisfaction betrayed him or else Ivlis guessed she had been tricked into betraying herself, for she gazed at him sharply. The superstitious excitement drained from her face and the hardness came back into her eyes.

"You're a man!" she spat at him suddenly. Then with fury, "Slevyas sent you!"

With that she jerked one of the dagger-long pins from her hair and flung herself at him, striking at his eyes. The wicked instrument tore the flap of his ear as he dodged. He caught her wrist with his left hand, clapped his right over her mouth. The struggle was brief and almost completely noiseless because of the thick carpeting on which they rolled. When she had been carefully trussed and gagged with strips torn from the silken hangings, the Mouser first closed the door to the stair, then pulled open the stone panel, finding the narrow passageway he had expected. Ivlis glared at him, every look a vituperation, and struggled futilely. But he knew there was no time for explanations. Hitching up his incongruous garments he sprang nimbly for the lamp, caught the upper edge. The chains held and he raised himself until his eyes could see over the edge. Cradled inside were the gleaming, glittering skull and the jewel-tipped bones.

The upper bowl of the crystal water clock was almost empty. Fafhrd stolidly watching the twinkling drops form and fall into the lower bowl. He was on the floor with his back to the wall. His legs were tied from knee to ankle, his arms laced behind him with an equally unnecessary

amount of cordage, so that he felt quite numb. To either side of him squatted an armed thief.

When the upper bowl emptied it would be midnight.

Occasionally his gaze shifted to the dark, disfigured faces which ringed the table on which the clock and certain curious instruments of torture rested. These were the aristocrats of the Thieves' Guild, men with crafty eyes and lean cheeks, who vied with one another as to the richness and greasiness of their finery. Flickering torches threw highlights on soiled reds and purples, tarnished cloth of silver and gold. But behind their masklike expressions Fafhrd sensed uncertainty. Only Slevyas, sitting in the chair of dead Krovas, seemed truly calm and self-possessed. His voice was almost casual as he interrogated a lesser thief who knelt abjectly before him.

"Are you indeed as great a coward as you would make us think?" He asked. "Would you have us believe you were afraid of an empty cellar?"

"Master, I am no coward," pleaded the thief. "I followed the Northerner's footprints in the dust along the narrow corridor and almost to the bottom of the ancient stair. But no man alive could hear without terror those strange, high voices, those bony rattlings. The dry air choked my throat, a wind blew out my torch. Things tittered at me. Master, I would attempt to filch a jewel from inside a wakeful cobra's coil if you should command it. But down into that place of darkness I could not force myself."

Fafhrd saw Slevyas' lips tighten and waited for him to pronounce sentence on the miserable thief, but remarks by the notables sitting around the table interrupted.

"There may be some truth to his tale," said one. "After all, who knows what may be in these cellars the Northerner's blundering discovered?"

"Until last night we never knew they existed," echoed another. "In the trackless dust of centuries strange things may lurk."

"Last night," added a third, "we scoffed at Fissif's tale. Yet on the throat of Krovas we found the marks of bony claws."

It was as if a miasma of fear had welled up from the cellars far below. Voices were solemn. The lesser thieves who stood near the walls, bearing torches and weapons, were obviously gripped by superstitious dread. Again Slevyas hesitated, although unlike the others he seemed perplexed rather than frightened. In the hush the monotonous splashes of the falling drops sounded loudly. Fafhrd decided to fish in troubled waters.

"I will tell you myself of what I found in the cellars," he said in a deep voice. "But first tell me where you thieves bury your dead."

Appraising eyes turned upon him. This was the first time he had spoken since he came to his senses. His question was not answered, but he was allowed to speak. Even Slevyas, although he frowned at Fafhrd and fingered a thumbscrew, did not object. And Fafhrd's words were something to hear. They had a cavernous quality which suggested the northland and the Cold Waste, a dramatic ring like that in the voice of a skald. He told in detail of his descent into the dark regions below. Indeed, he added new details for effect, and made the whole experience seem like some frightening epic. The lesser thieves, unused to this kind of talk, gaped at him. Those around the table sat very still. He spun out his story as long as he dared, playing for time.

During the pauses in his speech the dripping of the water clock was no longer to be heard. Then Fafhrd's ear caught a small grating sound, as of stone on stone. His listeners did not seem to notice it, but Fafhrd recognized it as the opening of the stone panel in the alcove, before which the black drapes still hung.

He had reached the climax of his revelations.

"There, in those forgotten cellars," his voice went a note deeper, "are the living bones of the ancient Thieves of Lankhmar. Long have they lain there, hating you who have forgotten them. The jeweled skull was that of their brother, Ohmphal. Did not Krovas tell you that the plans for stealing the skull were handed down from the dim past? It was intended that Ohmphal be restored to his brothers. Instead, Krovas desecrated the skull, tearing out the jewels. Because of that indignity, the bony hands found supernatural power with which to slay him. I know not where the skull is now. But if it has not already returned to them, those below will come for it even now, tonight. And they will not be merciful."

And then Fafhrd's words froze in his throat. His final argument, which had to do with his own release, remained unspoken. For, suspended in the air immediately in front of the black draperies of the alcove, was the skull of Ohmphal, its jeweled eyes glittering with an unnatural light that was more than reflection. The eyes of the thieves followed those of Fafhrd, and the air whistled with intaken breaths of fear, fear so intense that it momentarily precluded panic. A fear such as they felt toward their living master, but magnified many times. Moreover, they were sure that nothing living could be in the alcove. They had peered into it that very night and seen that it was empty. None knew of the panel.

And then a high wailing voice spoke from the skull, "Move not, oh you craven thieves of today! Tremble and be silent. It is your ancient master who speaks. Behold, I am Ohmphal!"

The effect of that voice was peculiar. Most of the thieves shrank back, gritting their teeth and clasping their hands to control trembling. But

the sweat of relief trickled down Fafhrd's forehead, for he recognized the Mouser. And in fat Fissif's face puzzlement mingled with fear, for he, too, thought of the Mouser and wondered.

"First," continued the voice from the skull, "I shall strangle the Northman as an example to you. Cut his bonds and bring him to me. Be quick, lest I and my brothers slay you all."

With twitching hands the thieves to the right and left of Fafhrd slit his lashings. He tensed his great muscles, trying to work out the paralyzing numbness. They pulled him to his feet and pushed him forward, stumbling, toward the skull.

Abruptly the black draperies were shaken by a commotion behind them. There came a shrill animal scream of rage in an entirely different voice. The skull of Ohmphal slid down the black velvet and rolled out into the room, the thieves leaping out of its way and squealing as if for fear it came to bite their ankles with poisoned teeth. From the hole in its base fell a candle which flickered out. The draperies swung to one side and two struggling figures reeled into the room. For a moment even Fafhrd thought he was going mad at such an utterly unexpected sight as a fight between an old hag in black, with skirts tucked above her knees, and a red-haired wench with a dagger. Then the hag's cowl and wig were torn off and he recognized, under a complexion of grease and ashes, the Mouser's snub nose. Fissif sprang forward past Fafhrd, his dagger out. The Northerner, awakening to action, caught him by the shoulder, hurled him against the wall, then snatched a sword from the fingers of a nerveless thief and staggered forward himself, muscles still numb.

Meanwhile Ivlis, becoming aware of the assembled thieves, suddenly stopped trying to skewer the Mouser. Fafhrd and the Mouser turned toward the alcove, where escape lay, and were almost bowled over by the sudden outrush of Ivlis' three bodybuards, come to rescue their mistress. The bodyguards immediately attacked Fafhrd and the Mouser, since they were nearest, chasing them back across the room, striking also at the thieves with their short heavy swords.

This delay gave the thieves time to recover from their fear. Slevyas, sensing the essentials of the situation, fairly drove a group of underlings to block the alcove, galvanizing them into action with flat-edged thwacks of his sword blade. Then came chaos and pandemonium. Swords clashed and skirled together. Daggers flashed. Men were knocked down by panicky, meaningless rushes. Heads were thumped and blood flowed. Torches were hurled like clubs, fell to the floor and singed the fallen, making them howl. Thief fought thief in the confusion, the notables who had sat at the table forming a unit for self-protection. Slevyas mustered a small body of followers and rushed Fafhrd. The Mouser tripped Slevyas, but the latter whirled around on his knees and ripped the black cloak with his longsword, almost skewering the small man. Fafhrd laid around him with a chair, bowling over those who opposed him, then spilled the table over on its side, the water clock crashing to splinters.

Gradually Slevyas regained control of the thieves. He knew they were at a disadvantage in the confusion, so his first move was to call them off, mustering them in two groups, one in the alcove, from which the drapes had been torn away, the other around the door. Fafhrd and the Mouser crouched behind the overturned table in the opposite angle of the room, its thick top serving as a barricade. The Mouser was somewhat surprised to find Ivlis crouching beside him.

"I saw you try to kill Slevyas," she whispered grimly. "In any case we are compelled to join forces."

With Ivlis was one of the bodyguards. The other two lay dead or insensible, along with the dozen thieves who were scattered around the floor among the fallen torches which cast a faint flickering eerie light on the scene. Wounded thieves moaned, and crawled or were dragged out into the corridor by their comrades. Slevyas was shouting for ropes and more torches.

"We'll have to make a rush," whispered Fafhrd through closed teeth with which he was knotting a bandage around a gash in his arm. And then he suddenly raised his head and sniffed. Somehow, through that confusion and the faint sweetish smell of blood had come an odor that made his flesh prickle and creep, an odor at once alien and familiar; a fainter odor, hot, dry and dusty. For a moment the thieves fell silent and Fafhrd thought he heard the sound of distant marching, the clicking tramp of bony feet.

Then a thief cried, "Master, master, the skull, the skull! It moves! It clamps its teeth!"

There was a confused sound of men drawing back, then Slevyas' curse. The Mouser, peering around the table top, saw Slevyas kick the jeweled

skull toward the center of the room.

"Fools! Cowards!" He cried to his cowering followers, "Do you still believe those lies, those old-wives' whispers? Do you think dead bones can walk? I and no other am your master! And may all dead thieves be damned eternally!"

With that he brought his sword down whistling. The skull of Ohmphal shattered like an eggshell. A whining cry of fear came from the thieves. The room grew darker as though it were filling with dust.

"Now follow me!" cried Slevyas. "Death to the intruders!"

But the thieves shrank back, darker shadows in the gloom. Fafhrd, sensing opportunity and mastering his growing fear, rushed out at Slevyas. The Mouser followed him. Fafhrd intended to kill with his third blow. First a swipe at Slevyas' longer sword to deflect it, next a quick blow at the side to bring him off guard, then finally a backhanded slash at the head.

But Slevyas was a better swordsman than that. He parried the third cut so that it whistled harmlessly over his head, then thrust at the Northerner's throat. That thrust brought Fafhrd's supple muscles to full life; true, the blade grazed his neck, but his parry, striking Slevyas' sword near the hilt, numbed the Master Thief's hand. Fafhrd knew he had him then and drove him back with a mercilessly intense onslaught. He did not notice how the room was darkening. He did not wonder why Slevyas' desperate calls for assistance went unanswered; why the thieves were crowding toward the alcove, and why the wounded were crawling back into the room. Toward the doorway to the corridor he drove Slevyas, so that the man was silhouetted against it. Finally as Slevyas reached the doorway, he disarmed him with a blow which sent the thief's sword spinning, and put his own point to Slevyas' throat.

"Yield!" he cried.

Only then he realized the hateful dusty odor was thick in his nostrils, that the room was in utter silence, that from the corridor came a hot wind and the sound of marching bones clicking against the stone pavement. He saw Slevyas look over his shoulder, and he saw a fear like death in Slevyas' face. Then came a sudden intense darkness, like a puff of inky smoke. But before it came he saw bony arms clasp Slevyas' throat, and, as the Mouser dragged him back, he saw the doorway crowded with black skeletal forms whose eyes glittered green and red and sapphire. Then utter darkness, hideous with the screams of the thieves as they fought to crowd into the narrow tunnel in the alcove. And over and above the screams sounded thin high voices, like those of bats, cold as eternity. One phrase he heard clear.

"Slayer of Ohmphal, this is the vengeance of Ohmphal's brothers."

Then Fafhrd felt the Mouser dragging him forward again, toward the corridor door. When he could see properly, he found they were fleeing through an empty Thieves' House—he, the Mouser, Ivlis, and the lone bodyguard.

Ivlis' maidservant, having barred the other end of the corridor in terror at the approaching sounds, crouched trembling in the rugs on the other side, listening in unwilling, sick horror—unable to flee—to the muffled screams and pleas and to the faint moaning sounds which bore a note of terrible triumph. The small black kitten arched its back, hair on end, and spat and hissed. Presently all sounds ceased.

Thereafter it was noted in Lankhmar that thieves were fewer. And it was rumored that the Thieves' Guild conducted strange rites at full moon, descending into deep cellars, and worshiping some sort of ancient gods. It was even said that they gave these gods, whoever they were, one third of all they stole.

But Fafhrd, drinking with the Mouser and Ivlis and a black-eyed wench from Tovilyis in an upper room at the Silver Eel, complained that the fates were unfair.

"All that trouble and nothing to show for it! The gods have a lasting grudge against us."

The Mouser smiled, reached into his pouch, and laid three rubies on the table.

"Ohmphal's fingertips," he said briefly.

"How can you dare keep them?" questioned Ivlis. "Think of what happened to all those other thieves!" She shuddered and eyed the Mouser with a certain solicitude.

"Ay, yes, that was unpleasant," replied the Mouser, "but since I am not an ordinary thief, I can afford to take chances."

THE END.

THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM

By Fredric Brown

When angleworms sprout angel wings and haloes before your eyes, and ducks appear from nowhere in hermetically sealed showcases—something more than an eye specialist is needed. But not many would have been able to figure the way to reach the proper specialist!

Illustrated by M. Isip

I.

Charlie Wills shut off the alarm clock and kept right on moving, swinging his feet out of bed and sticking them into his slippers as he reached for a cigarette. Once the cigarette was lighted, he let himself relax a moment, sitting on the side of the bed.

He still had time, he figured, to sit there and smoke himself awake. He had fifteen minutes before Pete Johnson would call to take him fishing. And twelve minutes was enough time to wash his face and throw on his old clothes.

It seemed funny to get up at five o'clock, but he felt swell. Golly, even with the sun not up yet and the sky a dull pastel through the window,

he felt great. Because there was only a week and a half to wait now.

Less than a week and a half, really, because it was ten days. Or—come to think of it—a bit more than ten days from this hour in the morning. But call it ten days, anyway. If he could go back to sleep again now, darn it; when he woke up it would be that much closer to the time of the wedding. Yes, it was swell to sleep when you were looking forward to something. Time flies by and you don't even hear the rustle of its wings.

But no—he couldn't go back to sleep. He'd promised Pete he'd be ready at five-fifteen, and if he wasn't, Pete would sit out front in his car and honk the horn, and wake the neighbors.

And the three minutes' grace were up, so he tamped out the cigarette and reached for the clothes on the chair.

He began to whistle softly: "I'm going to marry Yum Yum, Yum Yum" from "The Mikado." And tried—in the interests of being ready in time—to keep his eyes off the silver-framed picture of Jane on the bureau.

He must be just about the luckiest guy on earth. Or anywhere else, for that matter, if there was anywhere else.

Jane Pemberton, with soft brown hair that had little wavelets in it and felt like silk—no, nicer than silk—and with the cute go-to-hell tilt to her nose, with long graceful sun-tanned legs, with . . . dammit, with everything that it was possible for a girl to have, and more. And the miracle that she loved him was so fresh that he still felt a bit dazed.

Ten days in a daze, and then—

His eye fell on the dial of the clock, and he jumped. It was ten minutes after five, and he still sat there holding the first sock. Hurriedly, he finished dressing. Just in time! It was almost five-fifteen on the head as he slid into his corduroy jacket, grabbed his fishing tackle, and tiptoed down the stairs and outside into the cool dawn.

Pete's car wasn't there yet.

Well, that was all right. It'd give him a few minutes to rustle up some worms, and that would save time later on. Of course he couldn't really dig in Mrs. Grady's lawn, but there was a bare area of border around the flower bed along the front porch, and it wouldn't matter if he turned over a bit of the dirt there.

He took his jackknife out and knelt down beside the flower bed. Ran the blade a couple of inches in the ground and turned over a clod of it. Yes, there were worms all right. There was a nice big juicy one that ought to be tempting to any fish.

Charlie reached out to pick it up.

And that was when it happened.

His fingertips came together, but there wasn't a worm between them, because something had happened to the worm. When he'd reached out for it, it had been a quite ordinary-looking angleworm. A three-inch juicy, slippery, wriggling angleworm. It most definitely had *not* had a pair of wings. Nor a—

It was quite impossible, of course, and he was dreaming or seeing things, but there it was.

Fluttering upward in a graceful slow spiral that seemed utterly effortless. Flying past Charlie's face with wings that were shimmery-white, and not at all like butterfly wings or bird wings, but like—

Up and up it circled, now above Charlie's head, now level with the roof of the house, then a mere white—somehow a *shining* white—speck against the gray sky. And after it was out of sight, Charlie's eyes still looked upward.

He didn't hear Pete Johnson's car pull in at the curb, but Pete's cheerful hail of "Hey!" caught his attention, and he saw that Pete was getting out of the car and coming up the walk.

Grinning. "Can we get some worms here, before we start?" Pete asked. Then: "'Smatter? Think you see a German bomber? And don't you know never to look up with your mouth open like you were doing when I pulled up? Remember that pigeons— Say, *is* something the matter? You look white as a sheet."

Charlie discovered that his mouth was still open, and he closed it. Then he opened it to say something, but couldn't think of anything to say—or rather, of any way to say it, and he closed his mouth again.

He looked back upward, but there wasn't anything in sight any more, and he looked down at the earth of the flower bed, and it looked like ordinary earth.

"Charlie!" Pete's voice sounded seriously concerned now. "Snap out of it! Are you all right?"

Again Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it. Then he said weakly, "Hello, Pete."

"For cat's sake, Charlie. Did you go to sleep out here and have a nightmare, or what? Get up off your knees and— Listen, are you *sick?* Shall I take you to Doc Palmer instead of us going fishing?"

Charlie got to his feet slowly, and shook himself. He said, "I . . . I guess I'm all right. Something funny happened. But— All right, come on. Let's go fishing."

"But what? Oh, all right, tell me about it later. But before we start, shall we dig some— Hey, don't look like that! Come on, get in the car; get some fresh air and maybe that'll make you feel better."

Pete took his arm, and Pete picked up the tackle box and led Charlie out to the waiting car. He opened the dashboard compartment and took out a bottle. "Here, take a snifter of this."

Charlie did, and as the amber fluid gurgled out of the bottle's neck and down Charlie's he felt his

brain begin to rid itself of the numbness of shock. He could think again.

The whiskey burned on the way down, but it put a pleasant spot of warmth where it landed, and he felt better. Until it changed to warmth, he hadn't realized that there had been a cold spot in the pit of his stomach.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and said, "Gosh."

"Take another," Pete said, his eyes on the road. "Maybe, too, it'll do you good to tell me what happened and get it out of your system. That is, if you want to."

"I . . . I guess so," said Charlie. "It . . . it doesn't sound like much to tell it, Pete. I just reached for a worm, and it flew away. On white, shining wings."

Pete looked puzzled. "You reached for a worm, and it flew away. Well, why not? I mean, I'm no entomologist, but maybe there are worms with wings. Come to think of it, there probably are. There are winged ants, and caterpillars turn into butterflies. What scared you about it?"

"Well, this worm didn't have wings until I reached for it. It looked like an ordinary angleworm. Dammit, it *was* an ordinary angleworm until I went to pick it up. And then it had a . . . a— Oh, skip it. I was probably seeing things."

"Come on, get it out of your system. Give."

"Dammit, Pete, *it had a halo!*"

The car swerved a bit, and Pete eased it back to the middle of the road before he said, "A what?"

"Well," said Charlie defensively, "it looked like a halo. It was a little round golden circle just above its head. It didn't seem to be attached; it just floated there."

"How'd you know it was its head? Doesn't a worm look alike on both ends?"

"Well," said Charlie, and he stopped to consider the matter. How *had* he known? "Well," he said, "since it was a halo, wouldn't it be kind of silly for it to have a halo around the wrong end? I mean, even sillier than to have— Hell, you know what I mean."

Pete said, "Hmph." Then, after the car was around a curve: "All right, let's be strictly logical. Let's assume you saw, or thought you saw, what you . . . uh . . . thought you saw. Now, you're not a heavy drinker so it wasn't D. T's. Far as I can see, that leaves three possibilities."

Charlie said, "I see two of them. It could have been a pure hallucination. People do have 'em, I guess, but *I* never had one before. Or I suppose it could have been a dream, maybe. I'm sure I didn't, but I suppose that I could, have gone to sleep there and dreamed I saw it. But *that* isn't it. I'll concede the possibility of an hallucination, but not a dream. What's the third?"

"Ordinary fact. That you really saw a winged worm. I mean, that there is such a thing, for all I know. And you were just mistaken about it not having wings when you first saw it, because they were folded. And what you thought looked like a . . . uh . . . halo, was some sort of a crest or antenna or something. There *are* some damn funny-looking bugs."

"Yeah," said Charlie. But he didn't believe it. There may be funny-looking bugs, but none that suddenly sprout wings and haloes and ascend unto—

He took another drink out of the bottle.

II.

Sunday afternoon and evening he spent with Jane, and the episode of the ascending angleworm slipped into the back of Charlie's mind. Anything, except Jane, tended to slip there when he was with her.

At bedtime when he was alone again, it came back. The thought, not the worm. So strongly that he couldn't sleep, and he got up and sat in the armchair by the window and decided the only way to get it out of his mind was to think it through.

If he could pin things down and decide what had really happened out there at the edge of the flower bed, then maybe he could forget it completely.

O. K., he told himself, let's be strictly logical.

Pete had been right about the three possibilities. Hallucination, dream, reality. Now to begin with, it *hadn't* been a dream. He'd been wide awake; he was as sure of that as he was sure of anything. Eliminate that.

Reality? That was impossible, too. It was all right for Pete to talk about the funniness of insects and the possibility of antennae, and such— but Pete hadn't *seen* the danged thing. Why, it had flown past only inches from his eyes. And that halo had really *been* there.

Antennae? Nuts.

And that left hallucination. That's what it must have been, hallucination. After all, people *do* have hallucinations. Unless it happened often, it didn't necessarily mean you were a candidate for the booby hatch. All right then, accept that it was an hallucination, and so what? So forget it.

With that decided, he went to bed and—by thinking about Jane again—happily to sleep.

The next morning was Monday and he went back to work.

And the morning after that was Tuesday.

And on Tuesday—

III.

It wasn't an ascending angleworm this time. It wasn't anything you could put your finger on,

unless you can put your finger on sunburn, and that's painful sometimes.

But sunburn—in a rainstorm—

It was raining when Charlie Wills left home that morning, but it wasn't raining hard at that time, which was a few minutes after eight. A mere drizzle. Charlie pulled down the brim of his hat and buttoned up his raincoat and decided to walk to work anyway. He rather liked walking in rain. And he had time; he didn't have to be there until eight-thirty.

Three blocks away from work, he encountered the Pest, bound in the same direction. The Pest was Jane Pemberton's kid sister, and her right name was Paula, but most people had forgotten the fact. She worked at the Hapworth Printing Co., just as Charlie did; but she was a copyholder for one of the proofreaders and he was assistant production manager.

But he'd met Jane through her, at a party given for employees.

He said, "Hi there, Pest. Aren't you afraid you'll melt?" For it was raining harder now, definitely harder.

"Hello, Charlie-warlie. I like to walk in the rain."

She *would,* thought Charlie bitterly. At the hated nickname Charlie-warlie, he writhed. Jane had called him that once, but—after he'd talked reason to her—never again. Jane was reasonable. But the Pest had heard it— And Charlie was mortally afraid, ever after, that she'd sometime call him that at work, with other employees in hearing. And if *that* ever happened—

"Listen," he protested, "can't you forget that darn fool . . . uh . . . nickname? I'll quit calling you Pest, if you'll quit calling me . . . uh . . . *that.*"

"But I *like* to be called the Pest. *Why* don't you like to be called Charlie-warlie?"

She grinned at him, and Charlie writhed inwardly. Because she was *who* she was, he didn't dare—

There was pent-up anger in him as he walked into the blowing rain, head bent low to keep it out of his face. Damn the brat—

With vision limited to a few yards of sidewalk directly ahead of him, Charlie probably wouldn't have seen the teamster and the horse if he hadn't heard the cracks that sounded like pistol shots.

He looked up, and saw. In the middle of the street, maybe fifty feet ahead of Charlie and the Pest and moving toward them, came an overloaded wagon. It was drawn by an aged, despondent horse, a horse so old and bony that the slow walk by which it progressed seemed to be its speediest possible rate of movement.

But the teamster obviously didn't think so. He was a big, ugly man with an unshaven, swarthy face. He was standing up, swinging his heavy whip for another blow. It came down, and the old horse quivered under it and seemed to sway between the shafts.

The whip lifted again.

And Charlie yelled "Hey, there!" and started toward the wagon.

He wasn't certain yet just what he was going to do about it if the brute beating the other brute refused to stop. But it was going to be something. Seeing an animal mistreated was something Charlie Wills just couldn't stand. And wouldn't stand.

He yelled "Hey!" again, because the teamster didn't seem to have heard him the first time, and he started forward at a trot, along the curb.

The teamster heard that second yell, and he might have heard the first. Because he turned and looked squarely at Charlie. Then he raised the whip again, even higher, and brought it down on the horse's welt-streaked back with all his might.

Things went red in front of Charlie's eyes. He didn't yell again. He knew darned well now what he was going to do. It began with pulling that teamster down off the wagon where he could get at him. And then he was going to beat him to a pulp.

He heard Paula's high heels clicking as she started after him and called out, "Charlie, be caref—"

But that was all of it that he heard. Because, just at that moment, it happened.

A sudden blinding wave of intolerable heat, a sensation as though he had just stepped into the heart of a fiery furnace. He gasped once for breath, as the very air in his lungs and in his throat seemed to be scorching hot. And his skin—

Blinding pain, just for an instant. Then it was gone, but too late. The shock had been too sudden and intense, and as he felt again the cool rain in his face, he went dizzy and rubbery all over, and lost consciousness. He didn't even feel the impact of his fall.

Darkness.

And then he opened his eyes into a blur of white that resolved itself into white walls and white sheets over him and a nurse in a white uniform, who said, "Doctor! He's regained consciousness."

Footsteps and the closing of a door, and there was Doc Palmer frowning down at him.

"Well, Charles, what have you been up to now?"

Charlie grinned a bit weakly. He said, "Hi, doc. I'll bite. What *have* I been up to?"

Doc Palmer pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down in it. He reached out for Charlie's wrist and held it while he looked at the second hand of his watch. Then he read the chart at the end of the bed and said "Hmph."

"Is that the diagnosis," Charlie wanted to know, "or the treatment? Listen, first what about that

teamster? That is if you know—"

"Paula told me what happened. Teamster's under arrest, and fired. You're all right, Charles. Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious? What's it a non-serious case of? In other words, what happened to me?"

"You keeled over. Prostration. And you'll be peeling for a few days, but that's all. Why didn't you use a lotion of some kind yesterday?"

Charlie closed his eyes and opened them again slowly. And said, "Why didn't I use a— For *what?*"

"The sunburn, of course. Don't you know you can't go swimming on a sunny day and not get—"

"But I wasn't swimming yesterday, doc. Nor the day before. Gosh, not for a couple weeks, in fact. What do you mean, sunburn?"

Doc Palmer rubbed his chin. He said, "You better rest a while, Charles. If you feel all right by this evening, you can go home. But you'd better not work tomorrow."

He got up and went out.

The nurse was still there, and Charlie looked at her blankly. He said, "Is Doc Palmer going— Listen, what's this all about?"

The nurse was looking at him queerly. She said, "Why, you were. . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Wills, but a nurse isn't allowed to discuss a diagnosis with a patient. But you haven't anything to worry about; you heard Dr. Palmer say you could go home this afternoon or evening."

"Nuts," said Charlie. "Listen, what time is it? Or aren't nurses allowed to tell that?"

"It's ten-thirty."

"Golly, and I've been here almost two hours." He figured back; remembering now that he'd passed a clock that said twenty-four minutes after eight just as they'd turned the corner for that last block. And, if he'd been awake again now for five minutes, then for two full hours—

"Anything else you want, sir?"

Charlie shook his head slowly. And then because he wanted her to leave so he could sneak a look at that chart, he said, "Well, yes. Could I have a glass of orange juice?"

As soon as she was gone, he sat up in bed. It hurt a little to do that, and he found his skin was a bit tender to the touch. He looked at his arms, pulling up the sleeves of the hospital nightshirt they'd put on him, and the skin was pinkish. Just the shade of pink that meant the first stage of a mild sunburn.

He looked down inside the nightshirt, and then at his legs, and said, "What the hell—" Because the sunburn, if it *was* sunburn, was uniform all over.

And that didn't make sense, because he hadn't been in the sun enough to get burned at any time recently, and he hadn't been in the sun at all without his clothes. And—yes, the sunburn extended even over the area which would have been covered by trunks if he *had* gone swimming.

But maybe the chart would explain. He reached over the foot of the bed and took the clipboard with the chart off the hook.

"Reported that patient fainted suddenly on street without apparent cause. Pulse 135, respiration labored, temperature 104, upon admission. All returned to normal within first hour. Symptoms seem to approximate those of heat prostration, but—"

Then there were a few qualifying comments which were highly technical-sounding. Charlie didn't understand them, and somehow he had a hunch that Doc Palmer didn't understand them either. They had a whistling-in-the-dark sound to them.

Click of heels in the hall outside and he put the chart back quickly and ducked under the covers. Surprisingly, there was a knock. Nurses wouldn't knock, would they?

He said, "Come in."

It was Jane. Looking more beautiful than ever, with her big brown eyes a bit bigger with fright.

"Darling! I came as soon as the Pest called home and told me. But she was awfully vague. What on earth happened?"

By that time she was within reach, and Charlie put his arms around her and didn't give a darn, just then, what had happened to him. But he tried to explain. Mostly to himself.

IV.

People always try to explain.

Face a man, or a woman, with something he doesn't understand, and he'll be miserable until he classifies it. Lights in the sky. And a scientist tells him it's the aurora borealis—or the aurora australis—and he can accept the lights, and forget them.

Something knocks pictures off a wall in an empty room, and throws a chair downstairs. Consternation, until it's named. Then it's only a poltergeist.

Name it, and forget it. Anything with a name can be assimilated.

Without one, it's—well, unthinkable. Take away the name of anything, and you've got blank horror.

Even something as familiar as a commonplace ghoul. Graves in a cemetery dug up, corpses eaten. Horrible thing, it may be; but it's merely a ghoul; as long as it's named— But suppose, if you can stand it, there was no such word as *ghoul* and no concept of one. *Then* dug-up half-eaten corpses are found. Nameless horror.

Not that the next thing that happened to Charlie Wills had anything to do with a ghoul. Not even a werewolf. But I think that, in a way, he'd have found a werewolf more comforting than the duck,

One expects strange behavior of a werewolf, but a duck—

Like the duck in the museum.

Now, there is nothing intrinsically terrible about a duck. Nothing to make one lie awake at night, with cold sweat coming out on top of peeling sunburn. On the whole, a duck is a pleasant object, particularly if it is roasted. This one wasn't.

Now it is Thursday. Charlie's stay in the hospital had been for eight hours; they'd released him late in the afternoon, and he'd eaten dinner downtown and then gone home. The boss had insisted on his taking the next day off from work. Charlie hadn't protested, much.

Home, and, after stripping to take a bath, he'd studied his skin with blank amazement. Definitely, a third-degree burn. Definitely, all over him. Almost ready to peel.

It did peel, the next day.

He took advantage of the holiday by taking Jane out to the ball game, where they sat in a grandstand so he could be out of the sun. It was a good game, and Jane understood and liked baseball.

Thursday, back to work.

At eleven twenty-five, Old Man Hapworth, the big boss, came into Charlie's office.

"Wills," he said, "we got a rush order to print ten thousand handbills, and the copy will be here in about an hour. I'd like you to follow the thing right through the Linotype room and the composing room and get it on the press the minute it's made up. It's a close squeak whether we make deadline on it, and there's a penalty if we don't."

"Sure, Mr. Hapworth. I'll stick right with it."

"Fine. I'll count on you. But listen—it's a bit early to eat, but just the same you better go out for your lunch hour now. The copy will be here about the time you get back, and you can stick right with the job. That is, if you don't mind eating early."

"Not at all," Charlie lied. He got his hat and went out.

Dammit, it was too early to eat. But he had an hour off and he could eat in half that time, so maybe if he walked half an hour first, he could work up an appetite.

The museum was two blocks away, and the best place to kill half an hour. He went there, strolled down the central corridor without stopping, except to stare for a moment at a statue of Aphrodite that reminded him of Jane Pemberton and made him remember—even more strongly than he already remembered—that it was only six days now until his wedding.

Then he turned off into the room that housed the numismatics collection. He'd used to collect coins when he was a kid, and although the collection had been broken up since then, he still had a mild interest in looking at the big museum collection.

He stopped in front of a showcase of bronze Romans.

But he wasn't thinking about them. He was still thinking about Aphrodite, or Jane, which was quite understandable under the circumstances. Most certainly, he was not thinking about flying worms or sudden waves of burning heat.

Then he chanced to look across toward an adjacent showcase. And within it, he saw the duck.

It was a perfectly ordinary-looking duck. It had a speckled breast and greenish-brown markings on its wing and a darkish head with a darker stripe starting just above the eye and running down along the short neck. It looked like a wild rather than a domestic duck.

And it looked bewildered at being there.

For just a moment, the complete strangeness of the duck's presence in a showcase of coins didn't register with Charlie. His mind was *still* on Aphrodite. Even while he stared at a wild duck under glass inside a showcase marked "Coins of China."

Then the duck quacked, and waddled on its awkward webbed feet down the length of the showcase and butted against the glass of the end, and fluttered its wings and tried to fly upward, but hit against the glass of the top. And it quacked again and loudly.

Only then did it occur to Charlie to wonder what a live duck was doing in a numismatics collection. Apparently, to judge from its actions, the duck was wondering the same thing.

And only then did Charlie remember the angelic worm and the sunless sunburn.

And somebody in the doorway said, "*Pssst*. Hey."

Charlie turned, and the look on his face must have been something out of the ordinary because the uniformed attendant quit frowning and said, "Something wrong, mister?"

For a brief instant, Charlie just stared at him. Then it occurred to Charlie that this was the opportunity he'd lacked when the angleworm had ascended. Two people couldn't see the same hallucination. If it was an—

He opened his mouth to say "Look," but he didn't have to say anything. The duck beat him to it by quacking loudly and again trying to flutter through the glass of the case.

The attendant's eyes went past Charlie to the case of Chinese coins and he said "Gaw!"

The duck was still there.

The attendant looked at Charlie again and said, "Did *you*—" and then stopped without finishing the question and went up to the showcase to look at close range. The duck was still struggling to get out, but more weakly. It seemed to be gasping for breath.

The attendant said, "Gaw!" again, and then over his shoulder to Charlie: "Mister, *how* did you— That there case is her-hermetchically sealed. It's airproof. Lookit that bird. It's—"

It already had; the duck fell over, either dead or unconscious.

The attendant grasped Charlie's arm. He said firmly, "Mister, you come with me to the boss." And less firmly, "Uh . . . *how* did you get that thing in there? And don't try to tell me you didn't, mister. I was through here five minutes ago, and you're the only guy's been in here since."

Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it again. He had a sudden vision of himself being questioned at the headquarters of the museum and then at the police station. And if the police started asking questions about him, they'd find out about the worm and about his having been in the hospital for— And, golly, they'd get an alienist maybe, and—

With the courage of sheer desperation, Charlie smiled. He tried to make it an ominous smile; it may not have been ominous, but it was definitely unusual. "How would you like," he asked the attendant, "to find yourself in there?" And he pointed with his free arm through the entrance and out into the main hallway at the stone sarcophagus of King Mene-Ptah. "I can do it, the same way I put that duck—"

The museum attendant was breathing hard. His eyes looked slightly glazed, and he let go of Charlie's arm. He said, "Mister, did you really—"

"Want me to show you how?"

"Uh . . . Gaw!" said the attendant. He ran.

Charlie forced himself to hold his own pace down to a rapid walk, and went in the opposite direction to the side entrance that led out into Beeker Street.

And Beeker Street was still a very ordinary-looking street, with lots of midday traffic, and no pink elephants climbing trees and nothing going on but the hurried confusion of a city street. Its very noise was soothing, in a way; although there was one bad moment when he was crossing at the corner and heard a sudden noise behind him. He turned around, startled, afraid of what strange thing he might see there.

But it was only a truck, and he got out of its way in time to avoid being run over.

V.

Lunch. And Charlie was definitely getting into a state of jitters. His hand shook so that he could scarcely pick up his coffee without slopping it over the edge of the cup.

Because a horrible thought was dawning in his mind. *If* something was wrong with him, was it fair to Jane Pemberton for him to go ahead and marry her? Is it fair to saddle the girl one loves with a husband who might go to the icebox to get a bottle of milk and find—God knows what?

And he was deeply, madly in love with Jane.

So he sat there, an unbitten sandwich on the plate before him, and alternated between hope and despair as he tried to make sense out of the three things that had happened to him within the past week.

Hallucination?

But the attendant, too, had seen the duck!

How comforting it had been—it seemed to him now—that, after seeing the angelic angleworm, he had been able to tell himself it had been an hallucination. *Only* an hallucination.

But wait. Maybe—

Could not the museum attendant, too, have been part of the same hallucination as the duck? Granted that he, Charlie, could have seen a duck that wasn't there, couldn't he also have included in the same category a museum attendant who professed to see the duck? Why not? A duck and an attendant who sees it—the combination could be as illusory as the duck alone.

And Charlie felt so encouraged that he took a bite out of his sandwich.

But the *burn?* Whose hallucination was that? Or *was* there some sort of a natural physical ailment that could produce a sudden skin condition approximating mild sunburn? But, if there were such a thing, then evidently Doc Palmer didn't know about it.

Suddenly Charlie caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall, and it was one o'clock, and he almost strangled on that bite of sandwich when he realized that he was over half an hour late, and must have been sitting in the restaurant almost an hour.

He got up and ran back to the office.

But all was well; Old Man Hapworth wasn't there. And the copy for the rush circular was late and got there just as Charlie arrived.

He said *"Whew!"* at the narrowness of his escape, and concentrated hard on getting that circular through the plant. He rushed it to the Linotypes and read proof on it himself, then watched make-up over the compositor's shoulder. He knew he was making a nuisance of himself, but it killed the afternoon.

And he thought, "Only one more day to work after today, and then my vacation, and on *Wednesday—"*

Wedding on Wednesday.

But—

If—

The Pest came out of the proofroom in a green smock and looked at him. "Charlie," she said, "you look like something no self-respecting cat would drag in. Say . . . what's wrong with you? Really?"

"Ph . . . nothing. Say, Paula, will you tell Jane when you get home that I may be a bit late this evening? I got to stick here till these handbills are off the press."

"Sure, Charlie. But tell me—"

"Nix. Run along, will you? I'm busy."

She shrugged her shoulders, and went back into the proofroom.

The machinist tapped Charlie's shoulder. "Say, we got that new Linotype set up. Want to take a look?"

Charlie nodded and followed. He looked over the installation, and then slid into the operator's chair in front of the machine. "How does she run?"

"Sweet. Those Blue Streak models are honeys. Try it."

Charlie let his fingers play over the keys, setting words without paying any attention to what they were. He sent in three lines to cast, then picked the slugs out of the stick. And found that he had set: "For men have died and worms have eaten them and ascendeth unto Heaven where it sitteth upon the right hand—"

"Gaw!" said Charlie. And *that* reminded him of—

VI.

Jane noticed that there was something wrong. She couldn't have helped noticing. But instead of asking questions, she was unusually nice to him that evening.

And Charlie, who had gone to see her with the resolution to tell her the whole story, found himself weakening. As men always weaken when they are with the women they love and the parlor lamp is turned low.

But she did ask: "Charles—you *do* want to marry me, don't you? I mean, if there's any doubt in your mind and that's what has been worrying you, we can postpone the wedding till you're sure whether you love me enough—"

"Love you?" Charlie was aghast. "Why—"

And he proved it pretty satisfactorily.

So satisfactorily, in fact, that he completely forgot his original intention to suggest that very postponement. But *never* for the reason she suggested. With his arms around Jane—well, the poor chap was only human.

A man in love is a drunken man, and you can't exactly blame a drunkard for what he does under the influence of alcohol. You can blame him, of course, for getting drunk in the first place; but you can't put even that much blame on a man in love. In all probability, he fell through no fault of his own. In all probability his original intentions were strictly dishonorable; then, when those

intentions met resistance, the subtle chemistry of sublimation converted them into the stuff that stars are made of.

Probably that was why he didn't go to see an alienist the next day He was a bit afraid of what an alienist might tell him. He weakened and decided to wait and see if anything else happened.

Maybe nothing else would happen.

There was a comforting popular superstition that things went in groups of three, and three things had happened already.

Sure, that was it. From now on, he'd be all right. After all, there wasn't anything basically wrong; there couldn't be. He was in good health. Aside from Tuesday, he hadn't missed a day's work at the print shop in two years.

And—well, by now it was Friday noon and nothing had happened for a full twenty-four hours, and nothing was going to happen again.

It didn't, Friday, but he read something that jolted him out of his precarious complacency.

A newspaper account.

He sat down in the restaurant at a table at which a previous diner had left a morning paper. Charlie read it while he was waiting for his order to be taken. He finished scanning the front page before the waitress came, and the comic section while he was eating his soup, and then turned idly to the local page.

GUARD AT MUSEUM IS SUSPENDED
Curator Orders Investigation

And the cold spot in his stomach got larger and colder as he read, for there it was in black and white.

The wild duck had really been in the showcase. No one could figure out how it had been put there. They'd had to take the showcase apart to get it out, and the showcase showed no indication of having been tampered with. It had been puttied up air-tight to keep out dust, and the putty had not been damaged.

A guard, for reasons not clearly given in the article, had been given a three-day suspension. One gathered from the wording of the story that the curator of the museum had felt the necessity of doing *something* about the matter.

Nothing of value was missing from the case. One Chinese coin with a hole in the middle, a haikwan tael, made of silver, had not been findable after the affair; but it wasn't worth much. There was some doubt as to whether it had been stolen by one of the workmen who had disassembled the showcase or whether it had been accidentally thrown out with the debris of old putty.

The reporter, telling the thing humorously, suggested that probably the duck had mistaken the coin for a doughnut because of the hole, and had eaten it. And that the curator's best revenge would be to eat the duck.

The police had been called in, but had taken the attitude that the whole affair must have been a practical joke. By whom or how accomplished, they didn't know.

Charlie put down the paper and stared moodily across the room.

Then it definitely *hadn't* been a double hallucination, a case of his imagining both duck and attendant. And until now that the bottom had fallen out of that idea, Charlie hadn't realized how strongly he'd counted on the possibility.

Now he was back where he'd started.

Unless—

But that was absurd. Of course, theoretically, the newspaper item he had just read *could* be an hallucination too, but— No, that was too much to swallow. According to that line of reasoning, if he went around to the museum and talked to the curator, the curator himself would be an hallucin—

"Your duck, sir."

Charlie jumped halfway out of his chair.

Then he saw it was the waitress standing at the side of the table with his entree, and that she had spoken because he had the newspaper spread out and there wasn't room for her to put it down.

"Didn't you order roast duck, sir? I—"

Charlie stood up hastily, averting his eyes from the dish.

He said, "Sorry-gotta-make-a-phone-call," and hastily handed the astonished waitress a dollar bill and strode out. Had he really ordered— Not exactly; he'd told her to bring him the special.

But eat duck? He'd rather eat . . . no, not fried angleworms either. He shuddered.

He hurried back to the office, despite the fact that he was half an hour early, and felt better once he was within the safe four walls of the Hapworth Printing Co. Nothing out of the way had happened to him there.

As yet.

VII.

Basically, Charlie Wills was quite a healthy young man. By two o'clock in the afternoon, he was so hungry that he sent one of the office boys downstairs to buy him a couple of sandwiches.

And he ate them. True, he lifted up the top slice of bread on each and looked inside. He didn't know what he expected to find there, aside from boiled ham and butter and a piece of lettuce, but if he had found—in lieu of one of those ingredients—say, a Chinese silver coin with a hole in the middle, he would not have been more than ordinarily surprised.

It was a dull afternoon at the plant, and Charlie had time to do quite a bit of thinking. Even a bit of research. He remembered that the plant had printed, several years before, a textbook on ento-

mology. He found the file copy and industriously paged through it looking for a winged worm. He found a few winged things that might be called worms, but none that even remotely resembled the angleworm with the halo. Not even, for that matter, if he disregarded the golden circle, and tried to make identification solely on the basis of body and wings.

No flying angleworms.

There weren't any medical books in which he could look up—or try to look up—how one could get sunburned without a sun.

But he looked up "tael" in the dictionary, and found that it was equivalent to a liang, which was one-sixteenth of a catty. And that one official liang is equivalent to a hectogram.

None of which seemed particularly helpful.

Shortly before five o'clock he went around saying good-by to everyone, because this was the last day at the office before his two weeks' vacation, and the good-byes were naturally complicated by good wishes on his impending wedding—which would take place in the first week of his vacation.

He had to shake hands with everybody but the Pest, whom, of course, he'd be seeing frequently during the first few days of his vacation. In fact, he went home with her from work to have dinner with the Pembertons.

And it was a quiet, restful, pleasant dinner that left him feeling better than he'd felt since last Sunday morning. Here in the calm harbor of the Pemberton household, the absurd things that had happened to him seemed so far away and so utterly fantastic that he almost doubted if they had happened at all.

And he felt utterly, completely certain that it was all over. Things happened in threes, didn't they? *If* anything else happened— But it wouldn't.

It didn't, that night.

Jane solicitously sent him home at nine o'clock to get to bed early. But she kissed him good night so tenderly, and withal so effectively, that he walked down the street with his head in rosy clouds.

Then, suddenly—out of nothing, as it were—Charlie remembered that the museum attendant had been suspended, and was losing three days' pay, because of the episode of the duck in the showcase. And if that duck business was Charlie's fault—even indirectly—didn't he owe it to the guy to step forward and explain to the museum directors that the attendant had been in no way to blame, and that he should not be penalized?

After all, he, Charlie, had probably scared the poor attendant half out of his wits by suggesting that he could repeat the performance with a sarcophagus instead of a showcase, and the attendant had told such a disconnected story that he hadn't been believed.

But—*had* the thing been his fault? *Did* he owe—

And there he was butting his head against that brick wall of impossibility again. Trying to solve the insoluble.

And he knew, suddenly, that he had been weak in not breaking his engagement to Jane. That what had happened three times within the short space of a week might all too easily happen again.

Gosh! Even at the ceremony. Suppose he reached for the wedding ring and pulled out a—

From the rosy clouds of bliss to the black mire of despair had proved to be a walk of less than a block.

Almost he turned back toward the Pemberton home to tell them tonight, then decided not to. Instead, he'd stop by and talk with Pete Johnson.

Maybe Pete—

What he really hoped was that Pete would talk him out of his decision.

VIII.

Pete Johnson had a gallon jug, almost full, of wine. Mellow sherry. And Pete had sampled it, and was mellow, too.

He refused even to listen to Charlie, until his guest had drunk one glass and had a second on the table in front of him. Then he said, "You got something on your mind. O. K., shoot."

"Lookit, Pete. I told you about that angleworm business. In fact, you were practically there when it happened. And you know about what happened Tuesday morning on my way to work. But yesterday—well, what happened was worse, I guess. Because another guy saw it. It was a duck."

"What was a duck?"

"In a showcase at— Wait, I'll start at the beginning." And he did, and Pete listened.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "the fact that it was in the newspaper quashes one line of thought. Uh . . . fortunately. Listen, I don't see what you got to worry about. Aren't you making a mountain out of a few molehills?"

Charlie took another sip of the sherry and lighted a cigarette and said, "How?" quite hopefully.

"Well, three screwy things have happened. But you take any one by itself and it doesn't amount to a hill of beans, does it? Any one of them can be explained. Where you bog down is in sitting there insisting on a blanket explanation for all of them.

"How do you know there is any connection at all? Now, take them separately—"

"You take them," suggested Charlie. "How would you explain them so easy as all that?"

"First one's a cinch. Your stomach was upset or something and you had a pure hallucination.

Happens to the best people once in a while. Or —you got a second choice just as simple—maybe you saw a new kind of bug. Hell, there are probably thousands of insects that haven't been classified yet. New ones get on the list every year."

"Um," said Charlie. "And the heat business?"

"Well, doctors don't know everything. You got too mad seeing that teamster beating the horse, and anger has a physical effect, hasn't it? You slipped a cog somewhere. Maybe it affected your thermodermal gland."

"What's a thermodermal gland?"

Pete grinned. "I just invented it. But why not? The medicos are constantly finding new ones or new purposes of old ones. And there's *something* in your body that acts as a thermostat and keeps your skin temperature constant. Maybe it went wrong for a minute. Look what a pituitary gland can do for you or against you. Not to mention the parathyroids and the pineal and the adrenals.

"Nothing to it, Charlie. Have some more wine. Now, let's take the duck business. If you don't think about it with the other two things in mind, there's nothing exciting about it. Undoubtedly just a practical joke on the museum or by somebody working there. It was just coincidence that *you* walked in on it."

"But the showcase—"

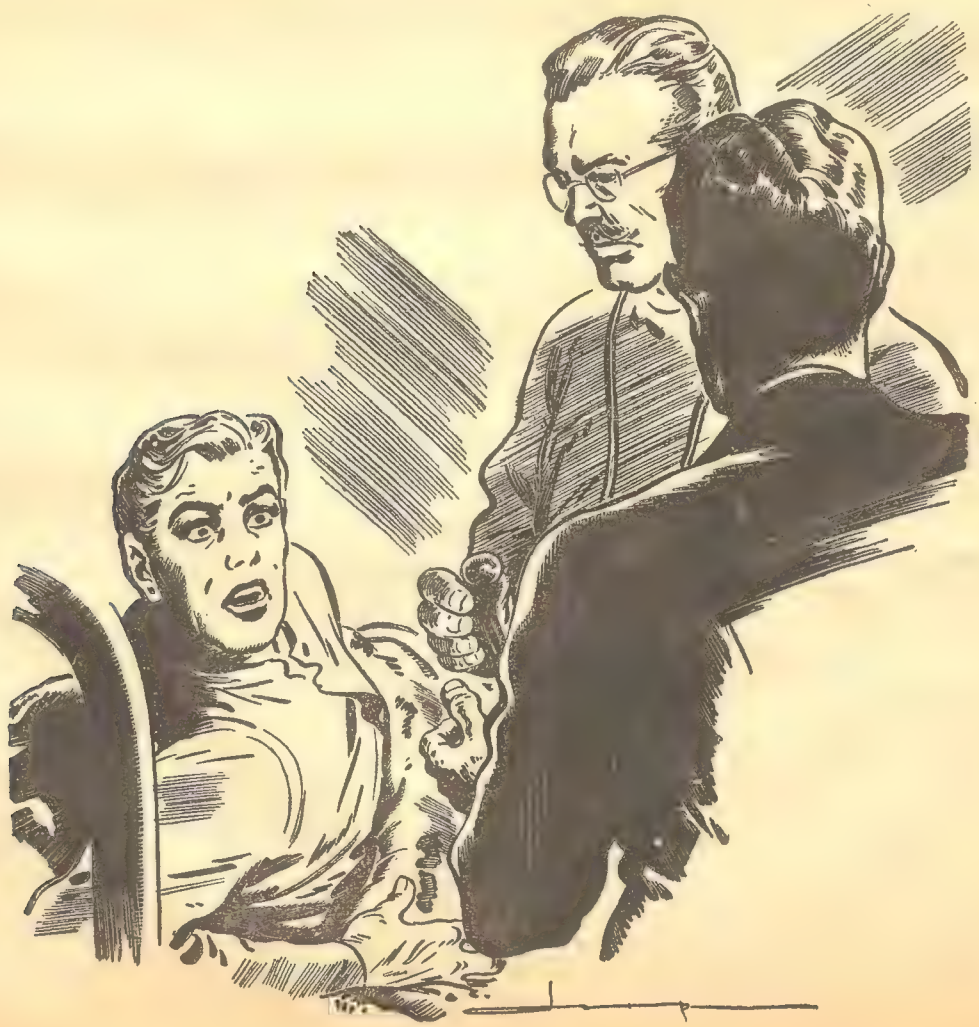
"Bother the showcase! It could have been done somehow; you didn't check that showcase yourself, and you know what newspapers are. And, for that matter, look what Thurston and Houdini could do with things like that, and let you examine the receptacles before and after. Maybe, too, it wasn't just a joke. Maybe somebody had a purpose putting it there, but why think that purpose had any connection with you? You're an egotist, that's what you are."

Charlie sighed. "Yes, but— But you take the three things together, and—"

"*Why* take them together? Look, this morning I saw a man slip on a banana peel and fall; this afternoon I had a slight toothache; this evening I got a telephone call from a girl I haven't seen in years. Now why should I take those three events and try to figure one common cause for all of them? One underlying motif for all three? I'd go nuts, if I tried."

"Um," said Charlie. "Maybe you got something there. But—"

Despite the "but—" he went home feeling cheer-



ful, hopeful, and mellow. And he was going through with the wedding just as though nothing had happened. Apparently nothing, of importance, *had* happened. Pete was sensible.

Charlie slept soundly that Saturday morning, and didn't awaken until almost noon.

And Saturday nothing happened.

IX.

Nothing, that is, unless one considered the matter of the missing golf ball as worthy of record. Charlie decided it wasn't; golf balls disappear all too often. In fact, for a dub golfer, it is only normal to lose at least one ball on eighteen holes.

And it was in the rough, at that.

He'd sliced his drive off the tee on the long fourteenth, and he'd seen it curve off the fairway, hit, bounce, and come to rest behind a big tree; with the tree directly between the ball and the green.

And Charlie's "Damn!" had been loud and fervent, because up to that hole he had an excellent chance to break a hundred. Now he'd have to lose a stroke chipping the stymied ball back onto the fairway.

He waited until Pete had hooked into the woods on the other side, and then shouldered his bag and walked toward the ball.

It wasn't there.

Behind the tree and at about the spot where he thought the ball had landed, there was a wreath of wilted flowers strung along a purple cord that showed through at intervals. Charlie picked it up to look under it, but the ball wasn't there.

So, it must have rolled farther, and he looked but couldn't find it. Pete, meanwhile, had found his own ball and hit his recovery shot. He came across to help Charlie look and they waved the following foursome to play on through.

"I thought it stopped right here," Charlie said, "but it must have rolled on. Well, if we don't find it by the time that foursome's off the green, I'll drop another. Say, how'd this thing get here?"

He discovered he still had the wreath in his hand. Pete looked at it and shuddered. "Golly, what a color combination. Violet and red and green on a purple ribbon. It stinks." The thing did smell a bit, although Pete wasn't close enough to notice that and it wasn't what he meant.

"Yeah, but what *is* it? How'd it get—"

Pete grinned. "Looks like one of those things Hawaiians wear around their necks. Leis, don't they call them? Hey!"

He caught the suddenly stricken look on Charlie's face and firmly took the thing out of Charlie's hand and threw it into the woods. "Now, son," he said, "don't go adding *that* damned thing to your string of coincidences. What's the difference who dropped it here or why? Come on, find your ball and let's get ready. The foursome's on the green already."

They didn't find the ball.

So Charlie dropped another. He got it out into the middle of the fairway with a niblick and then a screaming brassie shot straight down the middle put him on, ten feet from the pin. And he one-putted for a par five on the hole, even with the stroke penalty for a lost ball.

And broke a hundred after all. True, back in the clubhouse while they were getting dressed, he said, "Listen, Pete, about that ball I lost on the fourteenth. Isn't it kind of funny that—"

"Nuts," Pete grunted. "Didn't you ever lose a ball before? Sometimes you think you see where they land, and it's twenty or even forty feet off from where it really is. The perspective fools you."

"Yeah, but—"

There was that "but" again. It seemed to be the last word on everything that happened recently. Screwy things happen one after another and you can explain each one if you consider it alone, *but*—

"Have a drink," Pete suggested, and handed over a bottle.

Charlie did, and felt better. He had several. It didn't matter, because tonight Jane was going to a shower given by some girl friends and she wouldn't smell it on his breath.

He said, "Pete, got any plans for tonight? Jane's busy, and it's one of my last bachelor evenings—"

Pete grinned. "You mean, what are we going to do or get drunk? O. K., count me in. Maybe we can get a couple more of the gang together. It's Saturday, and none of us has to work tomorrow."

X.

And it was undoubtedly a good thing that none of them did have to work Sunday, for few of them would have been able to. It was a highly successful stag evening. Drinks at Tony's, and then a spot of bowling until the manager of the alleys began to get huffy about people bowling balls that started down one alley, jumped the groove, and knocked down pins in the alley adjacent.

And then they'd gone—

Next morning Charlie tried to remember all the places they'd been and all the things they'd done, and decided he was glad he couldn't. For one thing, he had a confused recollection of having tried to start a fight with a Hawaiian guitar player who was wearing a lei, and that he had drunkenly accused the guitarist of stealing his golf ball. But the others had dragged him out of the place before the police got there.

And somewhere around one o'clock they'd eaten, and Charlie had been so cussed that he'd

insisted on trying four eateries before they found one which served duck. He was going to avenge his golf ball by eating duck.

All in all, a very silly and successful spree. Undoubtedly worth a mild hangover.

After all, a guy gets married only once. At least, a man who has a girl like Jane Pemberton in love with him gets married only once.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened Sunday. He saw Jane and again had dinner with the Pembertons. And every time he looked at Jane, or touched her, Charlie had something the sensation of a green pilot making his first outside loop in a fast plane, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. The poor guy was in love.

XI.

But on Monday—

Monday was the day that really upset the apple cart. After five fifty-five o'clock Monday afternoon, Charlie knew it was hopeless.

In the morning, he made arrangements with the minister who was to perform the ceremony, and in the afternoon he did a lot of last-minute shopping in the wardrobe line. He found it took him longer than he'd thought.

At five-thirty he began to doubt if he was going to have time to call for the wedding ring. It had been bought and paid for, previously, but was still at the jewelers' being suitably engraved with initials.

He was still on the other side of town at five-thirty, awaiting alterations on a suit, and he phoned Pete Johnson from the tailor's:

"Say, Pete, can you do an errand for me?"

"Sure, Charlie. What's up?"

"I want to get the wedding ring before the store closes at six, so I won't have to come downtown at all tomorrow. It's right in the block with you; Scorwald & Benning's store. It's paid for; will you pick it up for me? I'll phone 'em to give it to you."

"Glad to. Say, where are you? I'm eating downtown tonight; how's about putting the feed bag on with me?"

"Sure, Pete. Listen, maybe I *can* get to the jewelers' in time; I'm just calling you to play safe. Tell you what; I'll meet you there. You be there at five minutes of six to be sure of getting the ring, and I'll get there at the same time if I can. If I can't, wait for me outside. I won't be later than six-fifteen at the latest."

And Charlie hung up the receiver and found the tailor had the suit ready for him. He paid for it, then went outside and began to look around for a taxi.

It took him ten minutes to find one, and still he saw he was going to get to the jewelry store in time. In fact, it wouldn't have been necessary for him to have phoned Pete. He'd get there easily by five fifty-five.

And it was just a few seconds before that time when he stepped out of the cab, paid off the driver, and strode up to the entrance.

It was just as his first foot crossed the threshold of the Scorwald & Benning store that he noticed the peculiar odor. He had taken one step farther before he recognized what it was, and then it was too late to do anything about it.

It had him. Unconsciously, he'd taken a deep sniff of identification, and the stuff was so strong, so pure, that he didn't need a second. His lungs were filled with it.

And the floor seemed to his distorted vision to be a mile away, but coming up slowly to meet him. Slowly, but getting there. He seemed to hang suspended in the air for a measurable time. Then, before he landed, everything was mercifully black and blank.

XII.

"Ether."

Charlie gawked at the white-uniformed doctor. "But how the d-devil could I have got a dose of ether?"

Peter was there, too, looking down at him over the doctor's shoulder. Pete's face was white and tense. Even before the doctor shrugged, Pete was saying: "Listen, Charlie, Doc Palmer is on his way over here. I told 'em—"

Charlie was sick at his stomach, very sick. The doctor who had said "Ether" wasn't there, and neither was Doc Palmer, but Pete now seemed to be arguing with a tall distinguished-looking gentleman who had a spade beard and eyes like a chicken hawk.

Pete was saying, "Let the poor guy alone. Dammit, I've known him all his life. He doesn't need an alienist. Sure he said screwy things while he was under, but doesn't anybody talk silly under ether?"

"But, my young friend"—and the tall man's voice was unctuous—"you quite misinterpret the hospital's motives in asking that I examine him. I wish to prove him sane. If possible. He may have had a legitimate reason for taking the ether. And also the affair of last week when he was here for the first time. Surely a normal man—"

"But dammit, he DIDN'T TAKE that ether himself. I saw him coming in the doorway after he got out of the cab. He walked naturally, and he had his hands down at his sides. Then, all of a sudden, he just keeled over."

"You suggest someone near him did it?"

"There *wasn't* anybody near him."

Charlie's eyes were closed but by the psychiatrist's tone of voice, he could tell that the man

was smiling. "Then how, my young friend, *do* you suggest that he was anesthetized?"

"Dammit, I don't know. I'm just saying he didn't—"

"Pete!" Charlie recognized his own voice and found that his eyes were open again. "Tell him to go to hell. Tell him to certify me if he wants. Sure I'm crazy. Tell him about the worm and the duck. Take me to the booby hatch. Tell him—"

"Ha." Again the voice with the spade beard. "You have had previous . . . ah . . . delusions?"

"Charlie, shut up! Doc, he's still under the influence of the ether; don't listen to him It isn't *fair* to psych a guy when he doesn't know what he's talking about. For two cents, I'd—"

"Fair? My friend, psychiatry is not a game. I assure you that I have this young man's interests at heart. Perhaps his . . . ah . . . aberration is curable, and I wish to—"

Charlie sat up in bed. He yelled, "GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I—"

Things went black again.

The tortuous darkness, thick and smoky and sickening. And he seemed to be creeping through a narrow tunnel toward a light. Then suddenly he knew that he was conscious again. But maybe there was somebody around who would talk to him and ask him questions if he opened his eyes, so he kept them tightly shut.

He kept his eyes tightly shut, and thought.

There must be an answer.

There wasn't any answer.

An angelic angleworm.

Heat wave.

Duck in a showcase of coins.

Wilted wreath of ugly flowers.

Ether in a doorway.

Connect them; there *must* be a connection. It *had* to make sense. It had to MAKE SENSE!

Least common denominator. Something that connects them, that welds them into a coherent series, something that you can understand, something that you can maybe do something about. Something you can fight.

Worm.

Heat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm.

Heat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm, heat, duck, wreath, ether, worm, heat, duck, wreath—

They pounded through his head like beating on a tom-tom; they screamed at him out of the darkness, and gibbered.

XIII.

He must have slept, if you could call it sleep.

It was broad daylight again, and there was only a nurse in the room. He asked, "What—day is it?"

"Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Wills. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Wednesday afternoon. Wedding day.

He wouldn't have to call it off now. Jane knew. Everybody knew. It had been called off for him. He'd been weak not to have done it himself, before—

"There are people waiting to see you, Mr. Wills. Do you feel well enough to entertain visitors?"

"I— Who?"

"A Miss Pemberton and her father. And a Mr. Johnson. Do you want to see them?"

Well, did he?

"Look," he said, "what exactly's wrong with me? I mean—"

"You've suffered a severe shock. But you've slept quietly for the last twelve hours. Physically, you are quite all right. Even able to get up, if you feel you want to. But, of course, you mustn't leave."

Of *course* he mustn't leave. They had him down as a candidate for the booby hatch. An excellent candidate. Young man most likely to succeed.

Wednesday. Wedding day.

Jane.

He couldn't bear to see—

"Listen," he said, "will you send in Mr. Pemberton, alone? I'd rather—"

"Certainly. Anything else I can do for you?"

Charlie shook his head sadly. He was feeling most horribly sorry for himself. Was there anything *anybody* could do for him?

Mr. Pemberton held out his hand quietly. "Charles, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am—"

Charlie nodded. "Thanks. I . . . I guess you understand why I don't want to see Jane. I realize that . . . that of course we can't—"

Mr. Pemberton nodded. "Jane . . . uh . . . understands, Charles. She wants to see you, but realizes that it might make both of you feel worse, at least right now. And Charles, if there's anything any of us can do—"

What was there anybody could do?

Pull the wings off an angleworm?

Take a duck out of a showcase?

Find a missing golf ball?

Pete came in after the Pembertons had gone away. A quieter and more subdued Pete than Charlie had ever seen.

He said, "Charlie, do you feel up to talking this over?"

Charlie sighed. "If it'd do any good, yes. I feel all right physically. But—"

"Listen, you've got to keep your chin up. There's

an answer somewhere. Listen, I was wrong. There is a connection, a tie-up between these screwy things that happened to you. There's got to be."

"Sure," said Charlie, wearily. "What?"

"That's what we've got to find out. First place, we'll have to outsmart the psychiatrists they'll sick on you. As soon as they think you're well enough to stand it. Now, let's look at it from their point of view so we'll know what to tell 'em. First—"

"How much do they know?"

"Well, you raved while you were unconscious, about the worm business and about a duck and a golf ball, but you can pass that off as ordinary raving. Talking in your sleep. Dreaming. Just deny knowing anything about them, or anything connected with any of them. Sure, the duck business was in the newspapers, but it wasn't a big story and your name wasn't in it. So they'll never tie that up. If they do, deny it. Now that leaves the two times you keeled over and were brought here unconscious."

Charlie nodded. "And what do they make of them?"

"They're puzzled. The first one they can't make anything much of. They're inclined to leave it lay. The second one— Well, they insist that you must, somehow, have given yourself that ether."

"But why? Why would anybody give himself ether?"

"No sane man would. That's just it; they doubt your sanity because they think you did. If you can convince them you're sane, then— Look, you *got* to buck up. They are classifying your attitude as acute melancholia, and that sort of borders on maniac depressive. See? You got to act cheerful."

"Cheerful? When I was to be married at two o'clock today? By the way, what time is it now?"

Pete glanced at his wrist watch and said, "Uh . . . never mind that. Sure, if they ask why you feel lousy mentally, tell them—"

"Dammit, Peter, I wish I *was* crazy. At least, being crazy makes sense. And if this stuff keeps up, I *will* go—"

"*Don't talk like that.* You got to fight."

"Yeah," said Charlie, listlessly. "Fight what?"

There was a low rap on the door and the nurse looked into the room. "Your time is up, Mr. Johnson. You'll have to leave."

XIV.

Inaction, and the futility of circling thought-patterns that get nowhere. Finally, he had to do something or go mad.

Get dressed? He called for his clothes and got them, except that he was given slippers instead of his shoes. Anyway, getting dressed took up time.

And sitting in a chair was a change from lying in bed. And then walking up and down was a change from sitting in a chair.

"What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, Mr. Wills."

Seven o'clock; he should have been married five hours by now.

Married to Jane; beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, understanding, kissable, soft, lovable Jane Pemberton. Five hours ago this moment she should have become Jane Wills.

Nevermore.

Unless—

The problem.

Solve it.

Or go mad.

Why would a worm wear a halo?

"Dr. Palmer is here to see you, Mr. Wills. Shall I—"

"Hello, Charles. Came as soon as I could after I learned you were out of your . . . uh . . . coma. Had an o. b. case that kept me. How do you feel?"

He felt terrible.

Ready to scream and tear the paper off the wall only the wall was painted white and didn't have any paper. And scream, scream—

"I feel swell, doc," said Charlie.

"Anything . . . uh . . . strange happen to you since you've been here?"

"Not a thing. But, doc, how would you explain—"

Doc Palmer explained. Doctors always explain. The air crackled with words like psychoneurotic and autohypnosis and traumata.

Finally, Charlie was alone again. He'd managed to say good-by to Doc Palmer, too, without yelling and tearing him to bits.

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

Six hours married.

Why is a duck?

Solve it.

Or go mad.

What would happen next? "Surely this thing shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the bughouse forever."

Eight o'clock.

Six hours married.

Why a lei? Ether? Heat?

What have they in common? And why is a duck?

And what would it be *next time?* When would next time be? Well, maybe he could guess that. How many things had happened to him thus far? Five—if the missing golf ball counted. How far apart? Let's see—the angleworm was Sunday morning when he went fishing; the heat prostration was Tuesday; the duck in the museum was Thursday noon, the second-last day he worked;

the golf game and the lei was Saturday; the ether Monday—

Two days apart.

Periodicity?

He'd been pacing up and down the room, now suddenly he felt in his pocket and found pencil and a notebook, and sat down in the chair.

Could it be—*exact* periodicity?

He wrote down "Angleworm" and stopped to think. Pete was to call for him to go fishing at five-fifteen and he'd gone downstairs at just that time, and right to the flower bed to dig— Yes, five-fifteen a. m. He wrote it down.

"Heat." Hm-m-m, he'd been a block from work and was due there at eight-thirty, and when he'd passed the corner clock he'd looked and seen that he had five minutes to get there, and then had seen the teamster and— He wrote it down. "Eight twenty-five." And calculated.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Let's see, which was next? The duck in the museum. He could time that fairly well, too. Old Man Hapworth had told him to go to lunch early, and he'd left at . . . uh . . . eleven twenty-five and if it took him, say, ten minutes to walk the block to the museum and down the main corridor and into the numismatics room— Say, eleven thirty-five.

He subtracted that from the previous one.

And whistled.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

The lei? Um, they'd left the clubhouse about one-thirty. Allow an hour and a quarter, say, for the first thirteen holes, and— Well, say between two-thirty and three. Strike an average at two forty-five. That would be pretty close. Subtract it.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Periodicity.

He subtracted the next one first—the fourth episode should have happened at five fifty-five on Monday. If—

Yes, it had been *exactly* five minutes of six when he'd walked through the door of the jewelry shop and been anesthetized.

Exactly.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Periodicity.

PERIODICITY.

A connection, at last. Proof that the screwy events were all of a piece. Every . . . uh . . . fifty-one hours and ten minutes *something screwy happened.*

But why?

He stuck his head out in the hallway.

"Nurse. NURSE. What time is it?"

"Half past eight, Mr. Wills. Anything I can bring you?"

Yes. No. Champagne. Or a strait jacket. Which?

He'd solved the problem. But the answer didn't make any more sense than the problem itself. Less, maybe. And today—

He figured quickly.

In thirty-five minutes.

Something would happen to him in thirty-five minutes!

Something like a flying angleworm or like a quacking duck suffocating in an air-tight showcase, or—

Or maybe something *dangerous* again? Burning heat, sudden anesthesia—

Maybe something worse?

A cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire, unnameable monster?

At nine-five. In half an hour.

In a sudden draft from the open window, his forehead felt cold. Because it was wet with sweat.

In half an hour.

What?

XV.

Pace up and down, four steps one way, four steps back.

Think, think, THINK.

You've solved part of it; what's the rest? Get it, or it will get you.

Periodicity; that's part of it. Every two days, three hours, ten minutes—

Something happens.

Why?

What?

How?

They're connected, those things, they are part of a pattern and they make sense somehow or they wouldn't be spaced an exact interval of time apart.

Connect: angleworm, heat, duck, lei, ether—

Or go mad.

Mad. *Mad.* MAD.

Connect: Ducks eat angleworms, or do they? Heat is necessary to grow flowers to make leis. Angleworms might eat flowers for all he knew, but what have they to do with leis, and what is ether to a duck? Duck is animal, lei is vegetable, heat is vibration, ether is gas, worm is . . . what the hell is a worm? And why a worm that flies? Why was the duck in the showcase? What about the missing Chinese coin with the hole? Do you add or subtract the golf ball, and if you let x equal a halo and y equal one wing, then x plus 2y plus 1 angleworm equals—

Outside, somewhere, a clock striking in the gathering darkness.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—

Nine o'clock.

Five minutes to go.

In five minutes, something was going to happen again.

Cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire. Or something cold and slimy and without a name.

Anything.

Pace up and down, four steps one way, four steps back.

Think, THINK.

Jane forever lost. Dearest Jane, in whose arms was all of happiness. Jane, darling, I'm not mad, I'm WORSE than mad. I'm—

WHAT TIME IS IT?

It must be two minutes after nine. Three.

What's coming? Cobra, devil, werewolf—

What will it be this time?

At five minutes after nine—WHAT?

Must be four after now; yes, it had been at least four minutes, maybe four and a half—

He yelled, suddenly. He couldn't stand the waiting.

It couldn't be solved. But he had to solve it.

Or go mad.

MAD.

He must be mad already. Mad to tolerate living, trying to fight something you couldn't fight, trying to beat the unbeatable. Beating his head against—

He was running now, out the door, down the corridor.

Maybe if he hurried, he could kill himself before five minutes after nine. He'd never have to know. Die, DIE AND GET IT OVER WITH. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY TO BUCK THIS GAME.

Knife.

There'd be a knife somewhere. A scalpel is a knife.

Down the corridor. Voice of a nurse behind him, shouting. Footsteps.

Run. Where? Anywhere.

Less than a minute left. Maybe seconds.

Maybe it's nine-five now. Hurry!

Door marked "Utility"—he jerked it open.

Shelves of linen. Mops and brooms. You can't kill yourself with a mop or broom. You can smother yourself with linen, but not in less than a minute and probably with doctors and interns coming.

Uniforms. Bucket. Kick the bucket, but *how?*

Ah. There on the upper shelf—

A cardboard carton, already opened, marked "Lye."

Painful? Sure, but it wouldn't last long. Get it over with. The box in his hand, the opened corner, and tilted the contents into his mouth.

But it was not a white, searing powder. All that had come out of the cardboard carton was a small copper coin. He took it out of his mouth and held it, and looked at it with dazed eyes.

It was five minutes after nine, then; out of the box of lye had come a small foreign copper coin. No, it wasn't the Chinese haikwan tael that had disappeared from the showcase in the museum, because that was silver and had a hole in it. And the lettering on this wasn't Chinese. If he remembered his coins, it looked Rumanian.

And then strong hands took hold of Charlie's arms and led him back to his room and somebody talked to him quietly for a long time.

And he slept.

XVI.

He awoke Thursday morning from a dreamless sleep, and felt strangely refreshed and, oddly, quite cheerful.

Probably because, in that awful thirty-five minutes of waiting he'd experienced the evening before, he'd hit rock bottom. And bounced.

A psychiatrist might have explained it by saying that he had, under stress of great emotion, suffered a temporary lesion and gone into a quasi-state of maniac-depressive insanity. Psychiatrists like to make simple things complicated.

The fact was that the poor guy had gone off his rocker for a few minutes.

And the absurd anticlimax of that small copper coin had been the turning point. Look for something horrible, unnameable—and get a small copper coin. Practically a prophylactic treatment, if you've got enough stuff in you to laugh.

And Charlie had laughed last night. Probably that was why his room this morning seemed to be a different room. The window was in a different wall, and it had bars across it. Psychiatrists often misinterpret a sense of humor.

But this morning he felt cheerful enough to overlook the implications of the barred windows. Here it was a bright new day with the sun streaming through the bars, and it was *another* day and he was still alive and had another chance.

Best of all, he knew he wasn't insane.

Unless—

He looked and there were his clothes hanging over the back of a chair and he sat up and put his legs out of bed, and reached for his coat pocket to see if the coin was still where he'd put it when they'd grabbed him.

It was.

Then—

He dressed slowly, thoughtfully.

Now, in the light of morning, it came to him that the thing could be solved. Six—now there were six—screwy things, but they were definitely connected. Periodicity proved it.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

And whatever the answer was, it was not malevolent. It was impersonal. If it had wanted to kill him, it had a chance last night; it need merely have affected something else other than the lye in that package. There'd *been* lye in the package when he'd picked it up; he could tell that by the weight. And then it had been five minutes after nine and instead of lye there'd been the small copper coin.

It wasn't friendly, either; or it wouldn't have subjected him to heat and anesthesia. But it must be something impersonal.

A coin instead of lye.

Were they all substitutions of one thing for another?

Hm-m-m. Lei for a golf ball. A coin for lye. A duck for a coin. But the heat? The ether? The angleworm?

He went to the window and looked out for a while into the warm sunlight falling on the green lawn, and he realized that life was very sweet. And that if he took this thing calmly and didn't let it get him down again, he might yet lick it.

The first clue was already his.

Periodicity.

Take it calmly; think about other things. Keep your mind off the merry-go-round and maybe the answer will come.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and felt in his pocket for the pencil and notebook and they were still there, and the paper on which he'd made his calculations of timing. He studied those calculations carefully.

Calmly.

And at the end of the list he put down "9:05" and added the word "lye" and a dash. Lye had turned to—what? He drew a bracket and began to fill in words that could be used to describe the coin: coin—copper—disk— But those were general. There must be a specific name for the thing.

Maybe—

He pressed the button that would light a bulb outside his door and a moment later heard a key turn in the lock and the door opened. It was a male attendant this time.

Charlie smiled at him. "Morning," he said. "Serve breakfast here, or do I eat the mattress?"

The attendant grinned, and looked a bit relieved. "Sure. Breakfast's ready; I'll bring you some."

"And . . . uh—"

"Yes?"

"There's something I want to look up," Charlie told him. "Would there be an unabridged dictionary anywhere handy? And if there is, would

it be asking too much for you to let me see it a few minutes?"

"Why—I guess it will be all right. There's one down in the office and they don't use it very often."

"That's swell. Thanks."

But the key still turned in the lock when he left.

Breakfast came half an hour later, but the dictionary didn't arrive until the middle of the morning. Charlie wondered if there had been a staff meeting to discuss its lethal possibilities. But anyway, it came.

He waited until the attendant had left and then put the big volume on the bed and opened it to the color plate that showed coins of the world. He took the copper coin out of his pocket and put it alongside the plate and began to compare it with the illustrations, particularly those of coins of the Balkan countries. No, nothing just like it among the copper coins. Try the silver—yes, there was a silver coin with the same mug on it. Rumanian. The lettering—yes, it was identically the same lettering except for the denomination.

Charlie turned to the coinage table. Under Rumania—

He gasped.

It couldn't be.

But it was.

It was impossible that the six things that had happened to him could have been—

He was breathing hard with excitement as he turned to the illustrations at the back of the dictionary, found the pages of birds, and began to look among the ducks. Speckled breast and short neck and darker stripe starting just above the eye—

And he knew he'd found the answer.

He'd found the factor, besides periodicity, that connected the things that had happened. If it fitted the others, he could be sure. The angleworm? Why—*sure*—and he grinned at that one. The heat wave? Obvious. And the affair on the golf course? That was harder, but a bit of thought gave it to him.

The matter of the ether stumped him for a while. It took a lot of pacing up and down to solve that one, but finally he managed to do it.

And then? Well, what could he *do* about it?

Periodicity? Yes, that fitted in. If—

Next time would be—hm-m-m—12:15 Saturday morning.

He sat down to think it over. The whole thing was completely incredible. The answer was harder to swallow than the problem.

But—they *all* fitted. Six coincidences, spaced an exact length of time apart?

All right then, forget how incredible it is, and what are you going to do about it? How are you going to get there to let them know?

Well—maybe take advantage of the phenomenon itself?

The dictionary was still there and Charlie went back to it and began to look in the gazeteer. Under "H—"

Whew! There was one that gave him a *double* chance. And within a hundred miles.

If he could get out of here—

He rang the bell, and the attendant came. "Through with the dictionary," Charlie told him. "And listen, could I talk to the doctor in charge of my case?"

It proved that the doctor in charge was still Doc Palmer, and that he was coming up anyway.

He shook hands with Charlie and smiled at him. That was a good sign, or was it?

Well, now if he could lie convincingly enough—

"Doc, I feel swell this morning," said Charlie. "And listen—I remembered something I want to tell you about. Something that happened to me Sunday, couple of days before that first time I was taken to the hospital."

"What was it, Charles?"

"I *did* go swimming, and that accounts for the sunburn that was showing up on Tuesday morning, and maybe for some other things. I'd borrowed Pete Johnson's car—" Would they check up on that? Maybe not. "—and I got lost off the road and found a swell pool and stripped and went in. And I remember now that I dived off the bank and I think I must have grazed my head on a rock because the next thing I remember I was back in town."

"Hm-m-m," said Doc Palmer. "So *that* accounts for the sunburn, and maybe it can account for—"

"Funny that it just came back to me this morning when I woke up," said Charlie. "I guess—"

"I told those fools," said Doc Palmer, "that there couldn't be any connection between the third-degree burn and your fainting. Of course there was, in a way. I mean your hitting your head while you were swimming would account—Charles, I'm sure glad this came back to you. At least we now know the cause of the way you've acted, and we can treat it. In fact, maybe you're cured already."

"I think so, doc. I sure feel swell now. Like I was just waking up from a nightmare. I guess I made a fool of myself a couple of times. I have a vague recollection of buying some ether once, and something about some lye—but those are like things that happened in a dream, and now my mind's as clear as a bell. Something seemed to pop this morning, and I was all right again."

Doc Palmer sighed. "I'm relieved, Charles. Frankly, you had us quite worried. Of course, I'll have to talk this over with the staff and we'll have to examine you pretty thoroughly, but I think—"

There were the other doctors, and they asked questions and they examined his skull—but whatever lesion had been made by the rock seemed to have healed. Anyway, they couldn't find it.

If it hadn't been for his suicide attempt of the evening before, he could have walked out of the hospital then and there. But because of that, they insisted on his remaining under observation for twenty-four hours. And Charlie agreed; that would let him out some time Friday afternoon, and it wasn't until twelve-fifteen Saturday morning that *it* would happen.

Plenty of time to go a hundred miles.

If he just watched everything he did and said in the meantime and made no move or remark which a psychiatrist could interpret—

He loafed and rested.

And at five o'clock Friday afternoon it was all right, and he shook hands all the way round, and was a free man again. He'd promised to report to Doc Palmer regularly for a few weeks.

But he was free.

XVII.

Rain and darkness.

A cold, unpleasant drizzle that started to find its way through his clothes and down the back of his neck and into his shoes even as he stepped off the train onto the small wooden platform.

But the station was there, and on the side of it was the sign that told him the name of the town. Charlie looked at it and grinned, and went into the station. There was a cheerful little coal stove in the middle of the room. He had time to get warmed up before he started. He held out his hands to the stove.

Over at one side of the room, a grizzled head regarded him curiously through the ticket window. Charlie nodded at the head and the head nodded back.

"Stayin' here a while, stranger?" the head asked.

"Not exactly," said Charlie. "Anyway, I hope not. I mean—" Heck, after that whopper he'd told the psychiatrists back at the hospital, he shouldn't have any trouble lying to a ticket agent in a little country town. "I mean, I don't think so."

"Ain't no more trains out tonight, mister. Got a place to stay? If not, my wife sometimes takes in boarders for short spells."

"Thanks," said Charlie. "I've made arrangements." He started to add "I hope" and then realized that it would lead him further into discussion.

He glanced at the clock and at his wrist watch and saw that both agreed that it was a quarter to twelve.

"How big is this town?" he asked. "I don't mean population. I mean, how far out the turnpike is it to the township line? The border of town."

"'Tain't big. Half a mile maybe, or a little better. You goin' out to th' Tollivers, maybe? They live just past and I heard tell he was sendin' to th' city for a . . . nope, you don't look like a hired man."

"Nope," said Charlie. "I'm not." He glanced at the clock again and started for the door. He said, "Well, be seeing you."

"You goin' to—"

But Charlie had already gone out the door and was starting down the street behind the railroad station. Into the darkness and the unknown and—Well, he could hardly tell the agent about his real destination, could he?

There was the turnpike. After a block, the sidewalk ended and he had to walk along the edge of the road, sometimes ankle deep in mud. He was soaked through by now, but that didn't matter.

It proved to be more than half a mile to the township line. A big sign there—an oddly big sign considering the size of the town—read:

You Are Now Entering Haveen

Charlie crossed the line and faced back. And waited, an eye on his wrist watch.

At twelve-fifteen he'd have to step across. It was ten minutes after already. Two days, three hours, ten minutes after the box of lye had held a copper coin, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after he'd walked into anesthesia in the door of a jewelry store, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after—

He watched the hands of his accurately set wrist watch, first the minute hand until twelve-fourteen. Then the second hand.

And when it lacked a second of twelve-fifteen he put forth his foot and at *the* fatal moment he was stepping slowly across the line.

Entering Haveen.

XVIII.

And as with each of the others, there was no warning. But suddenly:

It wasn't raining any more. There was bright light, although it didn't seem to come from a visible source. And the road beneath his feet wasn't muddy; it was smooth as glass and alabaster-white. The white-robed entity at the gate ahead stared at Charlie in astonishment.

He said: "How did *you* get here? You aren't even—"

"No," said Charlie. "I'm not even dead. But listen, I've got to see the . . . uh— Who's in charge of the printing?"

"The Head Compositor, of course. But you can't—"

"I've got to see him, then," said Charlie.

"But the rules forbid—"

"Look, it's important. Some *typographical errors* are going through. It's to your interests up here as well as to mine, that they be corrected, isn't it? Otherwise things can get into an awful mess."

"Errors? Impossible. You're joking."

"Then how," asked Charlie, reasonably, "did I get to Heaven without dying?"

"But—"

"You see I was supposed to be entering Haveen. There is an e-matrix that—"

"Come."

XIX.

It was quite pleasant and familiar, that office. Not a lot different from Charlie's own office at the Hapworth Printing Co. There was a rickety wooden desk, littered with papers, and behind it sat a small bald-headed Chief Compositor with printer's ink on his hands and a smear of it on his forehead. Past the closed door was a monster roar and clatter of typesetting machines and presses.

"Sure," said Charlie. "They're supposed to be perfect, so perfect that you don't even need proofreaders. But maybe once out of infinity something can happen to perfection, can't it? Mathematically, once out of infinity *anything* can happen. Now look; there is a separate typesetting machine and operator for the records covering each person, isn't there?"

The Head Compositor nodded. "Correct, although in a manner of speaking the operator and the machine are one, in that the operator is a function of the machine and the machine a manifestation of the operator and both are extensions of the ego of the . . . but I guess that is a little too complicated for you to understand."

"Yes, I—well, anyway, the channels that the matrices run in must be tremendous. On our Linotypes at the Hapworth Printing Co., an e-mat would make the circuit every sixty seconds or so, and if one was defective it would cause one mistake a minute, but up here— Well, is my calculation of fifty hours and ten minutes correct?"

"It is," agreed the Head Compositor. "And since there is no way you could have found out that fact except—"

"Exactly. And once every that often the defective e-matrix comes round and falls when the operator hits the e-key. Probably the ears of the mat are worn; anyway it falls through a long distributor front and falls too fast and lands ahead of its right place in the word, and a typographical error goes through. Like a week ago Sunday, I was supposed to pick up an *angleworm,* and—"

"Wait."

The Head Compositor pressed a buzzer and issued an order. A moment later, a heavy book was brought in and placed on his desk. Before the Head Compositor opened it, Charlie caught a glimpse of his own name on the cover.

"You said at five-fifteen a. m.?"

Charlie nodded. Pages turned.

"I'll be—blessed!" said the Head Compositor. "*Angleworm!* It must have been something to see. Don't know I've ever heard of an angelworm before. And what was next?"

"The e fell wrong in the word 'hate'—I was going after a man who was beating a horse, and—Well, it came out 'heat' instead of 'hate.' The e dropped two characters early that time. And I got heat prostration and sunburn on a rainy day. That was eight twenty-five Tuesday, and then at eleven thirty-five Thursday—" Charlie grinned.

"Yes?" prompted the Head Compositor.

"Tael. A Chinese silver coin I was supposed to see in the museum. It came out 'teal' and because a teal is a duck, there was a wild duck fluttering around in an air-tight showcase. One of the attendants got in trouble; I hope you'll fix that."

The Head Compositor chuckled. "I shall," he said. "I'd like to have seen that duck. And the next time would have been two forty-five Saturday afternoon. What happened then?"

"Lei instead of lie, sir. My golf ball was stymied behind a tree and it was supposed to be a poor lie—but it was a poor lei instead. Some wilted, mismatched flowers on a purple cord. And the next was the hardest for me to figure out, even when I had the key. I had an appointment at the jewelry store at five fifty-five. But that was the fatal time. I got there at five fifty-five, but the e-matrix fell four characters out of place that time, clear back to the start of the word. Instead of getting *there* at five fifty-five, I got *ether.*"

"*Tch, tch.* That one was unfortunate. And next?"

"The next was just the reverse, sir. In fact, it happened to save my life. I went temporarily insane and tried to kill myself by taking lye. But the bad e fell in lye and it came out *ley,* which is a small Rumanian copper coin. I've still got it,

for a souvenir. In fact when I found out the name of the coin, I guessed the answer. It gave me the key to the others."

The Head Compositor chuckled again. "You've shown great resource," he said. "And your method of getting here to tell us about it—"

"That was easy, sir. If I timed it so I'd be entering Haveen at the right instant, I had a double chance. If either of the two e's in that word turned out to be the bad one and fell—as it did—too early in the word, I'd be entering Heaven."

"Decidedly ingenious. You may, incidentally, consider the errors corrected. We've taken care of all of them, while you talked; except the last one, of course. Otherwise, you wouldn't still be here. And the defective mat is removed from the channel."

"You mean that as far as people down there know, none of those things ever—"

"Exactly. A revised edition is now on the press, and nobody on Earth will have any recollection of any of those events. In a way of speaking, they no longer ever happened. I mean, they did, but now they didn't for all practical purposes. When we return you to Earth, you'll find the status there just what it would have been if the typographical errors had not occurred."

"You mean, for instance, that Pete Johnson won't remember my having told him about the angelworm, and there won't be any record at the hospital about my having been there? And—"

"Exactly. The errors are *corrected.*"

"Whew!" said Charlie. "I'll be . . . I mean, well, I was supposed to have been married Wednesday afternoon, two days ago. Uh . . . will I be? I mean, *was* I? I mean—"

The Head Compositor consulted another volume, and nodded. "Yes, at two o'clock Wednesday afternoon. To one Jane Pemberton. Now if we return you to Earth as of the time you left there—twelve-fifteen Saturday morning, you'll have been married two days and ten hours. You'll find yourself . . . let's see . . . spending your honeymoon in Miami. At that exact moment, you'll be in a taxicab en route—"

"Yes, but—" Charlie gulped.

"But what?" The Head Compositor looked surprised. "I certainly thought that was what you wanted, Wills. We owe you a big favor for having used such ingenuity in calling those typographical errors to our attention, but I thought that being married to Jane was what you wanted, and if you go back and find yourself—"

"Yes, but—" said Charlie again. "But . . . I mean— Look, I'll have been married two days. I'll miss . . . I mean, couldn't I—"

Suddenly the Head Compositor smiled.

"How stupid of me," he said, "of course. Well, the time doesn't matter at all. We can drop you anywhere in the continuum. I can just as easily return you as of two o'clock Wednesday afternoon, at the moment of the ceremony. Or Wednesday morning, just before. Any time at all."

"Well," said Charlie, hesitantly. "It isn't exactly that I'd miss the wedding ceremony. I mean, I don't like receptions and things like that, and I'd have to sit through a long wedding dinner and listen to toasts and speeches and, well, I'd as soon have that part of it over with and . . . well, I mean. I—"

The Head Compositor laughed. He said, "Are you ready?"

"Am I— Sure!"

Click of train wheels over the rails, and the stars and moon bright above the observation platform of the speeding train.

Jane in his arms. His wife, and it was Wednesday evening. Beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, soft, kissable, lovable Jane—

She snuggled closer to him, and he was whispering, "It's . . . it's eleven o'clock, darling. Shall we—"

Their lips met, clung. Then, hand in hand, they walked through the swaying train. His hand turned the knob of the stateroom door and, as it swung slowly open, he picked her up to carry her across the threshold.

THE END.

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There's another way to eliminate bad errors in the world. Errors like Hitler and Hirohito.

BUY WAR BONDS!

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THE ULTIMATE WISH

By E. M. Hull

● **A new author proposes a different question on the old folk-lore problem of the granted wish. What one wish could such a mentally twisted one as Lola Pimmons make?**

Illustrated by M. Isip

Lola Pimmons limped into the office of Hoskins, Craig & Co., contractors, gloating joy almost exuding from her pores. Her body wriggled a little, as she hobbled toward her desk, an oddly unpleasant physical trembling, result of the glow of malevolent triumph that made thrill after thrill ooze along her nerves.

Behind her, she heard the office boy whisper to somebody: "Cripes, what's happened? Pimples looks as if she's struck it rich!"

The answer came in the unmistakable *sotto voce* of the lean bookkeeper: "I hope it's nothing good. I've met six hunchbacks in my life. The others were fine people; she's the only one that makes me think of snakes or worms."

There was a snicker from the girl at the telephone desk; and some of the high, almost abnormal happiness drained from Lola.

Her thin lips twisted into a startling likeness of a snarl. Her plump nose seemed to swell. The forty or fifty pimples on her round, pasty face, the effect of endless sweets on a basically un-

balanced metabolism, took on a purplish tinge. She half turned to send a futile glare of rage at her tormentors—and then she remembered.

Her intense fury made the memory such a violent pattern of compensatory exultation that—

There was a green flash in the air, and a small creature stood before her. Two red horns grew out of the forehead of its semihuman green face; the thing snapped at her.

"Don't get scared. I told you the first time that I could never appear twice in the same shape to a human being. And don't worry about these others. Time stops for you when I come. They can't hear or see us talking."

Lola's spasm of fear dwindled. The funny part was that she was not afraid of the creature. It had been the same that morning, when it had first appeared, as she finished dressing—she had actually managed to suppress the scream that formed in her throat.

She licked her lips now with a smacking sound of purest animal elation; behind that joy was a swift kaleidoscopic mind picture of all the frustration wishes that had ever distorted her daydreams and nightmares. She said:

"No, I haven't decided yet; and I'm not going to rush it. I want the best wish there is, and you said that I had till six o'clock."

"Yes, yes!" The green thing stamped impatiently with a froglike leg. "If you haven't decided, why did you call me? Is it questions you want to ask?"

"N-no!" Then: "Wait!" she said.

She stared at it more brightly, with a quivering eagerness, dimly amazed at her confidence. All her life she had stored the juices of her myriad resentments and hatreds until her body and mind were vile with the rancid stuff.

But with this creature, she felt—opened out, almost unpleasantly at ease. In a vague way, it *was* unpleasant to think that she and this—this fantastic being were kindred souls.

She forgot the thought. She stood very still, crouching a little from the abnormal flame of her happiness; the posture accentuated the great weight of misshaped bone and flesh she carried on her back.

A wish! One wish—for *anything!* Her mind soared with a deadly glee. For the very existence of it, the unearthly *thing* that it was, was evidence that here was no dream, but a stupendous reality.

It had come, it had said, because—

"All right, all right," the harsh voice spat at her. "Quit daydreaming. The facts are simple. I won a bet from . . . never mind from whom. And naturally I had to give you a wish."

Her mind couldn't concentrate on the words. Her thought was floating along like a balloon caught in a tornado, ripping through clouds, higher, higher.

"I want the best wish there is," she began, "the . . . the ultimate wish! And I've got to think . . . to feel—"

She stopped. She had a dizzy sensation that she was spinning through a world of light; and it wasn't altogether a pleasant feeling, for it brought a queer emptiness in the region of her stomach.

"Anything?" she asked. "I can have anything! *Anything?*"

"Within limits, of course," rasped the dwarf, "the limits of my power. I can only, for instance, kill twelve people for you. That's included under one wish. But you can have what you please, wealth, beauty, love—"

"Love!" said Lola; and squirmed mentally and physically, an astoundingly coarse movement, half shudder of pleasure, half wiggle.

She said, almost giggling: "I've got to think it over . . . give me time—"

"Awrk!" snarled the green monster. "Make up your mind."

It flicked out of sight, as if it had drawn itself through a slit. Lola stood gawking at the spot where it had been, her mouth open. She was standing there when her desk buzzer rang.

"Miss Pimmons," said a mechanical, baritone voice, "I want you to take some letters."

Her fingers shook, as she turned the knob of the door that led into the private office of John Russell Craig, the junior partner. He was standing looking out of the window, as she entered, a tall, clean-cut, worldly-looking young man of thirty-five. He must have heard her enter, for he turned and walked toward his desk. But he did not so much as glance at her.

Lola watched him with pale-blue eyes that watered behind her horn-rimmed glasses, and in spirit she could feel his strong arms crushing her tender body, his lips pressing her thin, moist mouth.

It was not the first time she had thought of him as a lover; a hundred nights spent in a futile fury of imagined orgies with this man had sharpened her sense of ecstasy to an intolerable pitch.

"I want him," she thought, *"him!"*

And then she quavered with the temerity of her wish, quaked with a sudden, immense doubt. How could she, Lola Pimmons, being what she was, ever get the handsome, wealthy John Craig as a husband?

Nevertheless—she glared at him defiantly—she wasn't going to back down. She'd have to find out how, have to—

Abruptly, an old woman loomed before her; an old woman with snapping black eyes and a long nose. Lola shrank, sent a dismayed glance at

her employer, then relaxed as she saw how still he had become, as if he had frozen in the midst of a movement. He stood, rather he half crouched on the very verge of sitting down. The old woman chuckled:

"That's right, my dear, don't worry about him. Ah, I see you've made your wish."

"I want to know first how you'd do it."

The crone leered: "You're a sharp one, eh? Well, all right. What do you want? Love or marriage?"

Lola tightened her lips, narrowed her eyes, snapped: "Don't try to kid me. I want enough love for marriage."

"Nope. That's two wishes. One's spiritual. The other's physical."

The old one wrinkled her long, hideous nose, added:

"I guess the likes of you won't be wanting the first."

"What do you mean?" Lola said, stung. Her eyes flashed a darker blue, with abrupt, easy hatred.

"The kind of love you can get," said the old wretch coolly, "doesn't pay dividends."

Lola was thoughtful. Her round, her too-round face twisted with a sullen moue. "What kind of love can I get?" she demanded.

"Better than the kind you give, my dear," smirked the other. Her voice softened, glowed a picture into words: "He'll start feeling sorry for you. Bring you an occasional box of chocolates, talk to you oftener; it'll be a sort of pity love," she finished.

Lola waited, then as the other made no attempt to go on, she said, amazed: "Is that all?"

The black eyes snapped; the old woman said: "I can only work with the material you offer. I might manage a kiss for you every Christmas."

Lola squirmed with a curious, unsightly movement of her body. She was not aware of the graceless action, and she would have been amazed if someone had told her that the maneuver was a physical expression of the thought that had come into her mind.

"Suppose I wanted to be his mistress?"

The moment she had spoken, she shivered. She hadn't intended to put it so baldly. For the barest instant she had the feeling that her soul had come out of her body with the words, and it was lying in the waste-paper basket beside her, a dirty, crumpled thing, for all to see and shudder at.

The grisly feeling passed, as the old woman chuckled slyly, and, seeming to understand what had passed through her mind, said: "Don't worry, my dear, we have no secrets from each other."

All reticence gone, Lola sat with open-mouthed eagerness. "Well?" she urged.

"An accident would do the trick," was the chilling answer. "Both his legs amputated, his face torn and scarred for life. Afterward, he'd feel that you were the best he could do."

"Ugh!" said Lola, and looked sick in her unbeautiful way. "What do you think I am?"

"My dear," crooned the old woman, "I *know* what you are. Let's not go into that."

Slowly, the black sense of limitation faded; Lola stared up at the creature woman, her crushed hopes bulging back into position. After a moment, the sustained quality of them brought a pouting belligerence to her attitude.

"What about marriage? I *can* marry him, I suppose."

The implied doubt held in it not an iota of sarcasm. Satire was simply not in her make-up; the whole business was too devastatingly important.

The old woman rubbed her hands raspingly: "You can have marriage within—a week." Her gray, wrinkled lips pursed, as if she was considering some dark, preliminary step. Then she nodded: "Yes, one week."

Lola's eyes glistened. The last tendril of her depression faded away. She sat in a cozy glow. Marriage to John Craig meant, automatically, wealth, a life of leisure, victory over the ghoulish office crew and—her teeth snapped tight—what did she care if he had no affection for her, though how—

She looked up quickly. "How would you work it?" she demanded.

The ancient hulk grimaced in silent, hideous laughter. "Smart as ever, my dear, aren't you?"

Her voice sank to a conspiratorial whisper: "Hoskins, Craig & Co. have government contracts as well as an important contract from an old customer, whose orders they are anxious to fill, but they can't obtain the necessary supplies from the priority board, isn't that so?"

"You mean, the Diamond Co. But how—"

"I'll see to it that the priorities board makes an error, and sends enough extra material to build the new place for the private firm; then I'll get the senior partner, Hoskins, out of the way for six months with a stroke; and Craig, who is a personal friend of the Diamonds, will take advantage of the government error, and start to build for his friends. Do you see?"

Lola frowned, her pasty face splotchy dark with puzzlement. "No!" she said at last.

The beady eyes snapped at her. "You're not very smart, are you?"

The creature's rage died almost instantly; she snickered: "It's not as complicated as it sounds. You simply confront him, threaten to expose him. He knows that the government is getting tougher every day; he'll be frightened, and he'll marry you."

Lola sat very quiet, her brows lined, examining the picture—and finding it good. A tiny amazement came that she felt no qualms about her capabilities for her share of the job, no sense of doubt, nothing but a cold, satisfying conviction that she could carry it through.

Above her, the old woman chuckled: "I guess you can see yourself that getting you married is no soft job for anyone. I can only work with the material I've got, and it all has to be natural."

"Forget it," Lola said curtly. "I can see the difficulties, and I'm prepared to face them."

"Then it's marriage?"

"Before I say yes," said Lola slowly, "I want to get everything clear. This *will* get me married to John Russell Craig, the man here in this room?"

"I guarantee it." The old woman nodded with a monstrous solemnity. "Only marriage, of course. Nothing else; you know that."

"Eh? I don't understand."

"Naturally, you can only have one wish. You can have neither love nor wealth nor satisfied revenge, nor can you stop the natural forces that have been set in motion."

Lola's body constricted with a nameless fear. "John Craig," she said carefully, as if she was reasoning every word, "is worth tens of thousands of dollars. No matter what happens, I'll have a legal right to the wife's share."

The old woman shrugged. "There won't be anything left after the government gets through with him. I can only stop the forces of law long enough to get you two married. That's all I promised—marriage—one wish."

"You mean the firm will be fined out of existence?"

"Not exactly. But he'll be out."

Lola's lips tightened; her muscles grew slowly taut. She shook her head defiantly. "I don't care. He's a good businessman. He'll get started again."

"A man can't do much when he's serving a ten-year jail sentence," was the cool reply; and Lola sat, hunched as if for warmth, shivering in that icy blast of defeat.

At last, she said dismally: "Isn't there some wish that would cover everything, sort of ultimate?"

It was a half thought, spoken out loud; and it was not until afterward that she remembered the old woman had not answered, had remained silent.

Lola finished: "I'll have to think it over."

"No hurry, my dear," the other said smoothly. "You've got until six o'clock. Take your time," she ended—and was gone!

Lola spent the morning in a haze of dismissed doubts and gathering hopes, parading wishes before her mind. She was like a reader of light novels limping distractedly through a library where a million such novels lured her aimless, disordered taste.

She was eating lunch with a grim intentness on her problem when—

She jumped, then frowned. "You gave me a shock," she said. "I didn't exactly want you. I just—"

"Your call was strong enough for me," retorted the gray, gnomeish thing that stood beside her table. "So it's money, eh?"

"Y-yes!" She spoke grudgingly. There was a thought in the back of her mind that she didn't quite want to bring out. She began: "Money can buy anything, can't it?"

"No!" The creature leered at her, as if understanding what she was thinking. "Money is good only if the buyer and seller can get together. And where," asked the thing with a pointedness that reached into the dark corners of her mind, and hauled up the writhing thought that was there—"where would you find the man who would take money for marrying you? Would you go up to someone in the street? Or what?"

Repelled, Lola shrank back. She stared at the gnome as at something loathsome; and then, abashed by its leer, but actually relieved that her thought had been put into blunt words, she said:

"Buying and selling in marriage is done in the highest circles. Isn't there some way it could be managed?"

"That's a separate wish," the gnome said matter-of-factly. "I can endow you with the ability to recognize at a glance men you could pay to marry you, and of course I'd give you the courage to speak to them."

"What about money?"

The monster shrugged. "You've got savings, only eight hundred dollars, but there are men who'd marry you for that."

Lola stared at the creature disconsolately. "What about money? How would you make me rich?"

"You understand that there's a limit to the wealth I can give you," began her companion; and the girl jerked with dismayed alarm.

"W-what?" Her round, pasty face grew bitter. She said: "Everything you've got is full of conditions. How much?"

"About a hundred thousand dollars. When we were first granted the power of bestowing wealth, a hundred thousand dollars was beyond the dreams of avarice. Our powers have not been increased with the development of . . . er . . . civilization."

"Oh!" She felt better, the return of glowing assurance. "A hundred thousand isn't so bad. And I suppose, maybe, that's what I'd better take. With money I could . . . perhaps I could meet somebody through a lonely-heart club."

The gnome was silent; and she looked at it sharply. "Could I?"

"That's another wish," the thing responded. "I might as well tell you that you're wasting your time trying to get two things with one wish. These lonely-heart clubs have two kinds of men in them—those who want companionship and those who want money. You'll get one of the latter, but you'll lose your money in the exchange."

The thing finished: "But all in all I think money is the best wish for you. You haven't any rich relatives whom I can kill off and so make an heir of you; so you go out and buy a sweepstake ticket, and I'll see that you win the first prize. O. K.?"

She felt torn. To commit herself definitely, with so many doubts, so many burning urges unsatiated—

"What time is it?" she asked finally.

"Same time as when we started talking: quarter to one."

"And I've got till six!" It was more a statement than a question, more a spoken thought than a statement. The gnome nodded:

"Is that all for now?"

"Yes— No, wait!"

The fading shape grew solid again; the gnome snarled at her:

"Make up your mind. In another instant, I would have been gone just far enough to make a change of shape necessary. What do you want?"

She hesitated, frowning; then slowly: "I asked you a question before that you didn't answer. I asked you whether there was an . . . an ultimate wish. Is there?"

The creature stared at her with a strange intentness. "Yes," it said, "there is. Do you want it?"

"What is it?"

"It has to be made blind," the creature answered —and vanished.

Across the street from the restaurant, Lola stopped abruptly before the gleaming window; and her eyes, weakly blue behind the owlish spectacles, peered with abrupt covetousness at a slinky black gown that draped a lean Judy against a background of fine furniture.

For a long, trembling moment, it was enough that the gown itself was a sheeny, lovely creation that she could own at the snap of a finger; and then, as the sun burst from a bed of clouds above, its brilliance emphasizing the shadows inside the window, and starkly reflecting the slight, crooked image of her body—she shuddered.

"Beauty," she thought with a pang that stabbed along her nerves. "If I had beauty—"

"Ah, beauty," said a twangy young woman's voice beside her; and Lola turned sharply.

She stared doubtfully at the blond, rather slovenly looking, bold-faced young woman who stood there. She said:

"Are you—"

"That's me, dearie," said the other cheerfully. "Is beauty what you want? You shall have it."

A faint edge of color crept into the blotched cheeks. A sudden picture of herself as a dark-haired, voluptuous creature brought abrupt, stark eagerness.

"Could I really be beautiful—beautiful enough to—"

"Beauty isn't the only essential for *that!*" was the slightly contemptuous answer.

Lola's color grew brighter. She rapped: "Why wouldn't beauty bring me a husband? Any good-looking girl can get married. Why, if I could just get rid of this . . . this—"

She couldn't utter the immeasurably distasteful word; but the straw blonde was not so shrinking. "I can take the hump away, and straighten your leg, and take off those pimples, and you won't need glasses—I can do all that but—"

"But, but, but!" raged Lola. "If I were beautiful, why couldn't I get married?"

The young woman shrugged. "There are thousands of good-looking girls within half a mile of us who'll never get married, some because they're shy; others are too sensitive; still others can attract men to the point of a meeting, and then repel them utterly—it's a matter of character, dearie," said the woman; and she laughed, a strangely wild laugh that gurgled oddly into silence.

Her eyes stared at Lola; and the girl shivered involuntarily. She hadn't noticed the creature's eyes before. They were as cold as ice, and fathomless.

"So I'd repel men, would I?" she said hoarsely. "Well, I'll change my character. I know just the method. My beauty would attract them, and then I'd just play dumb and—"

The young woman was indifferent, cool. "It's all right with me, sweetheart. Is it beauty you want?"

Lola looked at her sullenly. The very humanness of the demon's shape brought the strongest resentment she had yet experienced. There was a vague thought in her, that yesterday she had had nothing, no hope, no chance at anything but a lifetime of drudgery and abnormality; and now, here was a glittering, unheard-of opportunity to satisfy at least one of her deadly cravings and—

The thought faded into nothingness before the violence of the emotional storm that swept her.

"What's wrong?" she railed. "Why can't I take the beauty or the hundred thousand dollars, and so get everything?"

"What you don't understand, dearie," said the

woman in a curious, precise voice, "is that, when a wish is granted, a change is wrought in the structure of things as they are and as they would normally continue to be. Everything else but that change would carry on, as if it had not occurred, by a sort of cosmic momentum. No single human being can break through such ponderous forces. Is that clear enough?"

Lola stood stolid. Hope made a twisting path in her brain, down, down, like a bird struck dead in midflight, fluttering to the dark earth.

"I suppose so," she said at last, dully.

"Well, then, is it beauty?"

Lola sighed heavily, parted her lips to speak the affirmative; then her mind tightened convulsively on a thought:

"How would you do it?"

The woman laughed, raucously. "I thought you'd be coming to that. An accident, of course."

"Accident!"

"Yes, a car or a train or something hard and strong enough to break the hump bone, the leg bone and your face."

The witch finished: "The doctors and I would do the rest in putting you together."

With a hissing gasp, Lola emerged from her paralysis. She flared: "You miserable creature! And you nearly let me go through with a thing like that. Bones broken . . . hit by a train—"

A wave of sheerest physical faintness surged through her. She swayed and had to catch at the window to stay on her feet.

The whole world of her dreams lay in a shattered pile at the bottom of her mind.

The nausea trickled slowly out of her stunned system. She straightened, and stickily blinked some of the blur from her vision. The combination of actions brought a glimpse of malformed human image in the window—and, slowly, a tense calm fell upon her.

She stood, hypnotized by her reflection in the glass, forcing herself to look at the contours, every hideous curve, every unnatural line; and abruptly the ravenous hunger for beauty—at any price—came alive again within her.

"The doctors," she said finally, "how would you pay them?"

"I said nothing about that," was the cool reply. "That's something else again."

She had thought herself beyond emotion, but the words with their startling implications brought a surge of vertigo. "You mean," she said thickly, "my savings—"

"It would take more than that," said the woman indifferently. "Beauty for you isn't cheap. You'd have to go on paying for years."

A brief light of hope pierced the Stygian gloom in Lola's mind. "What," she asked sharply, "is to prevent me from getting the hundred thousand, and having the doctors break my bones, and reset them painlessly, under chloroform?"

"Human doctors!" said the woman contemptuously. "How would they know just where to break the bones? No, no, dearie, one wish, one wish, only one, one, one. Nothing else, nothing, nothing."

Lola stared morosely into vacancy. Her mind was a dim world of flitting passions, desire for money, good looks, marriage, revenge, love—each unsatisfactory by itself, each needing complementation to satiate the hundred fires that burned at white heat in her frail body.

For a bare moment, painful understanding came to her, a sense of the dark limitations of human hopes and aspirations. Abruptly, her immense frustration brought a furious anger.

"You miserable creature!" she raged. "What did you come into my life for, you—" She stopped, frowning. "What *did* make you do it? You said something about a bet. What kind of bet?"

The young woman shrugged. "Remember that little old woman you met on the street Tuesday night?"

Lola's face twisted; then she nodded with a curt sullenness; the other went on:

"My friend bet me no human being was low enough to do it. I said there was at least one." The witch laughed gleefully. "Naturally, when you helped me win that bet, I had to compensate you, according to the law governing such matters."

Lola stared at the woman, her eyes blazing with a pallid blue hatred. "You make me sick!" she said finally with utter malevolence. "What do I owe the world? Was I ever treated fairly? I hate them all, all, do you hear—the whole human race with their miserable hypocrisy. If you think I'm going to spend my life thinking sweet thoughts and doing good, you're—"

"Dearie!" The steady eyes glittered at her. "Your morality is your own, nor was morality at issue in my little bet. We had had a lecture by *him* on human nature, and we were discussing—

"But never mind that! Is it revenge you would like? Revenge on the twelve people you hate the most. Mind you, as I said before, twelve is the limit.

"Think of what I can do to them: That office boy who calls you Pimples; I can have him live in a sweat of his own pimples from now on. That telephone girl who giggles and sticks her tongue at you behind your back—many's the time you've caught her doing it—I can make her tongue twice, three times as big as it is, so that she'll practically have to keep it hanging out.

"And that clerk who calls you Humpy when he wants you to do work for him—I'll put a hump

on his back the size of a camel's. As for that fool who's always talking about your big bank account, I'll make him so tight with his money that he'll wear his clothes till they fall off; and he'll slowly starve himself into tuberculosis. Well?"

"No!" said Lola. She flashed on bitterly: "I'd like nothing better than to have that miserable bunch punished, but what good would it do? Twelve people out of a hundred million. Any other twelve would treat me the same; and if you think I'm going to cut off my nose to spite my face, you're—"

"Well, then," shrugged the young witch, "what about the opposite of revenge: Remember, you are one of Nature's botches, one of Nature's attempts at something different and better. No one is to blame. Your best wish, therefore, would perhaps be one that would make you contented with your lot. Would you like that?"

"Contented—with being as I am!"

The other was cool, practical. "Many afflicted people strike such a balance all by themselves, and manage to make something of their lives."

"Contentment!" said Lola; and all the discontent of all her years was in that one scathingly uttered word. A thought, sharp and startling, penetrated her mind.

"Look," she said, "that ultimate wish I've asked you about. It's not something stupid like . . . like contentment!"

"No, nothing like that, nothing stupid," was the answer; but Lola scarcely heard.

She stood as if transfixed, staring at the woman from half-closed eyes, cunning in her thought. So far, every time she had mentioned *that* wish, the creature had evaded in some fashion. The thing was suddenly as clear as glass. If there were such a wish—and the monster had reluctantly admitted there was—then it was the only possible wish. All the others were mutilations, miserable affairs entailing some tremendous sacrifice in exchange.

But the ultimate wish! Well, ultimate meant—ultimate!

She had a sudden high sense of destiny.

"What is it?" she demanded, abruptly, fiercely.

"Don't be a fool," said the young woman curtly. "Stick to the things you can put your fingers on: money, beauty, love—things that I can tell you about."

Lola stared at her like a trapped animal. "Why can't you tell me? What's wrong? If I choose it, I'll know what it is; so why not tell me?"

The answer was curiously sharp: "It's not good for human beings to know what the ultimate wish is. It grows out of the nature of things."

"Oh, you—" Lola began; but the woman cut her off:

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"It's none of my business, dearie, but I honestly think you should forget all about it. In my opinion, you wouldn't choose it if you knew what it was. There, that's as much as I'll tell you."

"If it's an ultimate wish," said Lola slowly, "it must satisfy—everything."

Her bewilderment actually hurt her physically. Her brain was a dark pool of thoughts that followed now one path, now another, as she blankly searched her own desires for a clue to the secret.

"Forget it, forget it!" said the blonde. "Think of love, physical love; a husband for this very night."

"And all my savings to pay for him!" said Lola grimly.

"Marriage to the man you love. No longer Lola Pimmons, but Mrs. John Russell Craig?"

"To a jailbird, you mean. Nothing doing."

"Mistress?"

"Of a legless man with a horribly scarred face. Ugh!"

"Revenge?"

"What good would it do *me?*"

"Beauty?"

A tinge of color crept into Lola's cheeks. "Beauty," she said, and her eyes glowed. "Beauty forever!"

"Not forever," was the dry comment, "but subject to the wear and tear of life."

Lola sent her a wild glare. She swayed dizzily from sheer dismay. "How long would it last? Do you mean to tell me—"

"Dearie," said the other, "you're thirty-two now. Some women fall to pieces at thirty-five, others hold on till forty-five. I could tell you when Nature would strike you, but that's another wish."

The shock was too great to absorb all at once. Her face bleached to a sickly gray; the black, burning realization stung along her nerves that, no matter how she worked it, her youth, all hope of normal life, was gone before it had ever begun.

Abruptly, she couldn't face that fate. "No, no," she gasped. "There must be a way. Youth. You can make me younger. I should have thought of that before. Twenty—sixteen—"

"That's another wish. Do you really want to live *your* life over again?"

Lola said nothing; but it was a silence of appalled comprehension. The hard-boiled voice beat at her consciousness:

"Money," it said. "Money is by far your best wish."

Lola stirred. Some of the life came back to her body. She said grimly: "So you left money to the last. All the way through, you've urged money on me. Well, I won't take it. It isn't enough. I want the greatest wish there is, the ultimate wish."

"Is that final?" The young woman's voice was strangely far away, as if she had somehow withdrawn a part of herself. Her eyes were dark, ice-cold and enigmatic.

For a fraction of a second, Lola hesitated. It wasn't that a thought came. Her mind was swamped in a swirl of black passions. It was simply the enormous, instinctive caution in her nature.

The shadow of vague fear passed. "Yes," she blazed, "yes!"

"Very well!" The young blonde was matter-of-fact. "You have made your wish."

"Well"—Lola was impatient—"when will I receive—"

She was talking to empty air.

She saw the truck two minutes later, as she stepped off the curb. It careened around the corner, and loomed vast above her slight form. She had time for one desperate flash of terrible insight. Then—

Death came, hard and irresistible, bringing ultimate surcease to the volcanic, acidic and tormented flesh that had been Lola Pimmons.

THE END.

NO GRAVEN IMAGE

By Cleve Cartmill

● The natives of all lands have one superstition in common; that the camera and the painter and the sculptor are dangerous, for they steal your soul. Bit by bit, perhaps, and unimportant in amount to an ordinary man. But to a "most-photographed" movie star?

Illustrated by Kolliker

Lily Kung bowed before the makeshift altar in Norman Courtney's bedroom. She whispered a curse, and a prayer—a curse on the Soul Eater, a prayer to her ancestors' gods. With traditional ceremony, she burned a rectangle of miniature-camera film, and a puff of pungent smoke drifted upward.

I kept an eye on Norman, in the white sanatorium bed. I wasn't interested in her ancient abracadabra, but I was curious to see what would happen to him. It wasn't much.

Still, it was something.

It was a little gleam in his big chocolate eyes, a tiny flame of intelligence. Not much, but still more than the empty lifelessness of the past eight weeks. Not that he was human, or even nearly so, but he was no longer a living, breathing dead man.

"Hi, pal," I said, and for the first time in two months he rolled his head toward the sound of a voice. He didn't speak, he didn't smile, but he moved.

Lily got up from the floor in the corner, shucked off the robe she had borrowed from her father,

and was an American girl again—who only looked Chinese. She wasn't a priestess any longer—a priestess doesn't light her eyes with flames of enthusiasm. A priestess doesn't have the prettiest gams in town.

She looked down at Norman, and he shifted his gaze to her. She breathed a little hard, and clenched her hands. "You see?" she exclaimed to me. "You see, Al? Look! There's a change!"

She pattered around the end of the bed and tugged at my sleeve. "Come on, Al! Come on! We're on the right track."

I shrugged. "Relax, baby. I'll admit something happened. He doesn't look so much like a zombi."

"He isn't, Al. He never was. He was simply undead. Now a little piece of his soul has returned."

"Maybe. Maybe. I don't necessarily believe it, but I won't argue. I've had every big specialist in the country here in this hide-out, and this is the first improvement. It may be coincidence, but I don't know. What do we do next?"

"We get all the negatives we can, and destroy them the same way. There must be several hundred miles of film filed in various studios. Not to mention the historic originals in the vaults of the Museum."

"Even a script girl," I said, "should know you can't get the negatives from a Hollywood vault. All that silver is valuable."

"And is a man's soul valuable?"

"Not to the people who own the film. Except Zachary, perhaps. He's got Norman under contract. Maybe he'll do something."

"Can't we get a court order?"

"What would you say? 'If it please the court, the savages were right, and every time a man's picture is snapped, a piece of his soul is trapped on the negative. We petition in the name of the most photographed man in history. We ask that all his negatives be given us to destroy with certain rites.' Is that what we say? Can't you hear the snickers?"

"What do I care about snickers? Look."

She pointed at Norman. The smooth face, the graying hair. Norman Courtney, famous on the screen from the age of five, when he was a freckled star with no front teeth. His hands were now outside the covers, and he was earnestly placing the tips of his fingers together in a geometric pattern, his ugly-handsome face drawn with concentration.

"That's a man," Lily said. "What's all the silver in the world, compared to his identity?"

"You're tossing away all your traditions, baby. Life is cheaper in China than almost anywhere."

"I'm different, Al. Me and my generation."

"All right. As long as there's hope, I'll stick. What now?"

Lily looked at me. "Nobody knows he's here?"

"Nobody but Dr. Barq and his staff. They won't peep."

"Let's go talk to him."

She gathered her stuff, shoved it into the Gladstone, and we took a last look at Norman.

You know what? You go to school with a guy, you see him grow through one stage of development after another, and you don't remember what he was like when you first knew him. It seems he was always that way.

Like Norman. Of course, I'd seen him in the Baby Bunting series, I'd seen him as Frank Merriwell, as Stalky, but I never knew him as a person till we attended the same school. From then until now we'd been together, with me acting as his agent, and I hadn't noticed any change. His personality was so strong that it never occurred to you that he'd ever been different.

It occurred to me as I looked at him in the sanatorium bed. Here he was with no personality—except the bit which seemed to have come back to him, just enough to enable him to fit the tips of his fingers together if he tried hard. I remembered the crooked, freckled grin of the little boy, the long stride of the college runner, the quiet humor of the man.

You look at an empty shell, you remember what was inside once upon a time.

"Let's go," I said. "Quick!"

The attendant who had been waiting in the next room cat-footed into the bedroom as we went out into the corridor where there was no prickly emptiness. The occasional patient buzzing around or dozing in a wheel chair just had ordinary things wrong with him, like old age, or paranoia, or a broken back. Anywhere outside Norman's suite was everyday routine.

Except in Dr. Barq's office. The pretty receptionist was burning up the telephone dial, a couple of nurses rushed into the doc's inner office, another rushed out with a grim look, and following her through the open door darted short groans of agony.

Dr. Barq's voice quivered with real terror—and pain, as if he were hanging by his fingernails from sharp hooks. I started for the door, but the little receptionist thrust a palm at me.

"Don't go in there!" she said to me, and into the telephone: "Send Dr. Williams at once!"

"What goes?" I asked her. "Sounds like the rats got to somebody."

"Dr. Barq has been taken ill suddenly. Will you please go? Please, please!"

"Keep your shoulders limp," Lily Kung said to her. "If we can't help, we want to leave a message. Will you shed enough hysteria to listen?"

The little blonde tensed at Lily's tone, then relaxed. When somebody in the private office

closed the door on doc's moans, she said, "Sorry. What is the message?"

"Write it down," Lily commanded. "This is important." When the girl had a pencil poised: "Nobody," Lily said, and underlined it, "nobody is to take a photograph of Mr. Courtney. If the newspapers find out he's here, you'll have your hair full of photographers. But if anybody gets in there with a camera, Dr. Barq will wish he'd never opened this place. Tell him that, from a Chinese physician's daughter."

The blonde questioned me with her eyebrows, and I said, "I'll back that up. Anything Miss Kung says goes. It's her war from now on."

When a stop light caught us on the way back to town, I frowned at Lily. "Didn't you kind of heave your weight around?"

"Al," she said. "I have a feeling we'd better get him out of there."

"What's eating you?"

"I just have a feeling, that's all."

"Well, we can't. Besides, Dr. Barq runs the most suitable place within reach."

"Granted. But why can't we move him?"

"Because, baby, I'm broke. I can't get him out of hock till he can sign a check. I spent all the dough I had by flying specialists out here. They come high."

She was quiet for a few blocks. Then, "Al, I have a . . . a little. Maybe it's enough. You're welcome to it, for Mr. Courtney."

"Thanks, but why should you risk your savings? A script girl has tough enough time with her own troubles."

"But he got me the job, Al. All because my elder brother helped him through a course of philosophy. He's welcome to anything I've got."

"If we can't get along without it, baby, O. K. But why the jitters?"

"I don't know, Al. I got 'em. No reason."

"Well, let's duck into my office for a drink and some phone calls. What's the program?"

"Here's what my father told me, Al. He knows about this. He said we'd have to get hold of enough film to free fifty percent of his soul. With that much back where it belongs, the rest will follow."

"I'll play it your way, but I don't see it, baby. I don't see why the same thing doesn't happen to other movie people."

"It will, Al, as soon as they've been photographed as much as Norman. My father has been looking for something like this to happen for a long time. Take a look at this. You see some pretty peculiar behavior around Hollywood. Is it because of the strain? Father says no, but that they lose a piece of their soul each time a shutter clicks. We saw evidence that it's imprisoned on the negative."

"Coincidence, maybe. He's been resting for a couple of months. Anybody would get better."

"Not coincidence. Answer me this. Why did the news photos of Norman right after his collapse show nothing but a white silhouette? And why should he collapse immediately after I took that candid shot of him as he walked off the set of 'Hickory, Dickory, Death'? He registered on my film. I sold a print to *Pic* for twenty-five dollars. You saw it on this week's cover."

"I'd like to know how the *Pic* reporter got the story of his coma. Well, it landed your picture on the cover. Is that the first time you've hit a national mag?"

"Yes, but don't try to change the subject. Why wouldn't he photograph?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know."

"You just won't admit it. He had no soul, that's why. Look, Al, maybe the old adages had something to them, or the old legends. Vampires, werewolves, and other beings without souls will not reflect in a mirror. Therefore, they won't photograph. Norman Courtney wouldn't photograph, so it seems he had no soul."

"Mythology isn't very good evidence."

"Why not? People didn't dream up those stories without some basis. You've got a commandment: make no graven image. It has a new significance under the circumstances."

"Let me make myself clear," I said. "You don't have to sell me your screwy slant on things to get my help. I told you we'd play it your way till it plays out. So let's duck into the office and outline some action."

"Speaking of the office, Al, what are you going to do with Pat in this set-up?"

Pat, I thought. Patience Ryan, red-headed wood sprite, gentle Pat.

"I'm going to tell her. Don't be surprised if she strings along with you."

"I expect that. Let me ask you something, Al. Don't frighten Pat."

"Why does everybody in Hollywood think Pat needs protection? I'm able to protect her. I'm going to marry her. Besides, she doesn't need protection. She's a tough little mick."

"She's so frail, Al!"

"Don't worry about her."

I burned a little as I cut out Sunset to the office. All the time it was like that. Patience looked like threaded glass, flawed a little with a few freckles, and whenever we walked into a joint, strong men sat around grimly waiting for me to make a pass.

As we entered the building foyer, Lily gave a little cry and snatched the current *Pic* from the newsstand.

"Al! Look, Al!"

Norman Courtney's face wasn't on the cover,

where it had been earlier in the day. In the square from which he had exposed his famous teeth was now only a white silhouette of his profile, sleek head, and the tip of one ear.

My hackles rose as I looked at the other copies on the stand.

The colored border, masthead, date line—these were unchanged, as was the caption: "Zombi?" But the likeness of the most photographed man in history was a white outline with no shading, no perspective, no nothing.

Lily arched an eyebrow at the proprietor. "What?"

He shrugged, struck a match which he didn't apply to his cigar. "Don't ask me. All over town it's so. Bad ink, I guess. Happened about an hour ago. Herman the Hermit was here, tellin' his theory about Courtney, lookin' at the cover. Like to jumped out of his robe, and stubbed a toe roundin' the turn into the street. Damn!" he exclaimed, and flung down the match and sucked at his finger. "Did you find Norman yet?"

"No, he's still missing."

"Funniest damn thing."

"This is funnier," I said, looking at the blank cover.

Later, we found that Hollywood's Man of the Year had simultaneously disappeared from the copies of *Pic* on newsstands, in homes, hospitals, drugstores, dental offices; in gutters, ash cans, subways; in fan clubs, air liners, locker rooms; in New York and Narragansett, Memphis and Minneapolis, Denver and Des Moines, Oshkosh and Oakland, Harrisburg and Hollywood.

But even without knowing how universal the fade-out was, it gave us a chill. Lily dropped the magazine back in the rack and skittered toward the elevator.

"Come on, Al!"

My subscription copy of *Pic* was the same, and I began to feel some of the excitement which sent Lily around the office in a rigadoon. The dance merely confused Pat, who came to the connecting door between our offices and followed Lily's antics with wide green eyes.

"She had watch springs for lunch," I explained. "Come in, Red. We'll tell you a story."

When I finished, Pat picked up the magazine. "This cover blanked out on other copies, too?"

"Yes, and I'll admit it seems more than coincidence when it happened at about the time Lily destroyed the negative, together with that spark Norman seemed to get. I don't believe it, but—"

"Al!" Lily cut in. "I just got it. We *must* move Norman away from that place. Dr. Barq is a Soul Eater!"

She was a priestess again, like in Norman's bedroom. Afire inside. She stood stiff in the middle of the floor, with sort of mystical flames in her wide black eyes.

Pat looked at me. "What's a Soul Eater?"

"A ghoul, Red. Look, Lily, enough's enough. I'll take the film yarn, with reservations, but Dr. Barq has one of the best reputations in the country."

"He runs no risk in a hospital," Lily said. "What better place could a ghoul operate inconspicuously? Now and then a patient dies, and Dr. Barq extends his own life by absorbing the soul."

"But if Norman's is on a lot of negatives," Pat objected, "what can the doctor gain from him?"

Lily came back to earth. "Ye-es, that's true. I'm off the beam, I guess. We still have the major problem, though, of making Norman a man again. You'll follow my leads?"

"You're driving."

"We must have the negatives, then. But, look, if you haven't any money, how do we go about it?"

Pat looked at me. She didn't say anything. She looked.

"Now take it easy, honey," I said. "I was going to tell you. I spent the bank roll on Norman's doctor bills."

"Am I out of line?" Lily asked.

"No," Pat said. "It's all right, Al. I hate to wait, but it's in a good cause."

"As soon as he's able to sign checks, we'll get married, Pat. I'm sorry."

"Al!" Lily exclaimed. "Didn't you tell her?"

"This isn't your business, Lily."

"It is, it is! Nobody's going to shove Pat around. You should have told her what you were doing. Look at the child. You've busted her heart!"

She eased Pat into a chair and stroked her hair. "I'll kick him in the stomach, pet."

"It's all right," Pat said, blinking. "I wish you'd told me, Al, but it's O. K."

"I'll make it up to you, Red."

"I know you will, Al. Only— Well, it seems funny you didn't write checks on Norman's account. You have a power of attorney from him."

I dug it out of the file and showed it to her. "It expired a few days before this thing happened to him. I meant to have it renewed, but didn't."

"But why didn't you petition the court for an extension? You could even do it now, and get some operating capital."

I tried to grin as I reached for the telephone. "I'm a dope. Why do you want to marry me?"

"Somebody's got to keep you from giving away your shirt. And I'm the handiest."

I called Eddie Lanin. "You can do something to earn the fat retainer I promised, Eddie."

I told him what I wanted, hung up and looked at Lily. "Now what?"

"Let's go see Dunhill, and try to get the Museum's negative file."

"I'll call him."

Lily checked me with a gesture. "It's much easier to say no into a phone than to a person. Especially for Dunhill."

"Speaking of calling," Pat said, "Zachary has been screaming for you every fifteen minutes. Better give him a ring."

"Nuh-uh. All he wants to know is when Norman reports for retakes on 'Hickory, Dickory, Death.' He wants to cash in on all this collapse publicity. Come on, Lily. We're just talking. Let's get some action."

I kissed Pat briefly. "Don't tear your hair, Red. Soon as this business is finished, we'll page a parson and head for Murdoc Dry Lake."

"Head for what?"

"Everybody goes to Niagara for their honeymoon. All that water. It's silly."

Drew Dunhill hadn't learned the hard way. He hadn't worked his way from office boy to secretary of the Museum. Old Man Dunhill *was* the Museum for the last two years of his life, and Drew moved in the day after they filed the Old man under a brass marker and three tons of flowers.

Drew was tall and slouchy, with a pale and knowing eye. He had access to his father's files, and knew more detailed scandal than all the keyhole columnists. When he wanted things done, they were done.

But his influence didn't extend to the top flight of boy geniuses who had rocketed into Hollywood in the past few years. The new stars, directors, and producers used him as a sort of office boy who provided them with historical data, who ran off old films for them when they needed a fresh plot, and who bowed deeply to them and their wives.

He regarded me with a nice mixture of obsequiousness and contempt. I had connections, I was Norman Courtney's agent, but I wasn't really big stuff. The swimming pool in my patio was no bigger than a bird bath, since that's what it was built for.

But for Lily Kung he had nothing. She simply didn't exist. She was a script girl, and Chinese to boot. He didn't acknowledge the introduction, he didn't look at her a second time, he didn't speak to her.

He folded his hands on the glass desk top and allowed his mouth to lift at one corner. "What do you want me to do, Al?"

I motioned Lily into a chair and sat on the arm. "I want to borrow, rent, or buy all the negatives of Norman's pictures and those in which he appears."

His pale eyes took on a slight glaze. "I'm very sorry, but it's completely impossible."

"Why?"

"All the negatives in our vaults are historical documents. I cannot allow them to be touched."

"But, Mr. Dunhill," Lily protested, "we want them only long enough to make prints. It's a matter of life and death."

He ignored her, kept his pale eyes steady on his sleek hands.

"You know," I said, "about Norman. A big mind-and-matter man from the East said that his breakdown might have been caused by a childhood trauma. You've got his early pictures. We want to borrow them, run 'em off and look for evidence of some major change in his childhood."

Dunhill made a reflective triangle of his thumbs and forefingers and placed his chin on the apex. "I could possibly let you have a print, Al, providing the directors will approve it—which I doubt. It's all right with me, you understand. But I'm just an employee here. Can you come in again next week, or give me a ring? And I'm glad to have seen you, Al."

"I don't want a print. Don't brush me off so fast. You know how prints are cut for programming, or how they sometimes catch fire and a sequence burns. I've got to have the originals."

"It's impossible."

I got up. "Come on, Lily."

Dunhill waved a negligent hand, started fiddling with a paper on his desk, and we went out to a corner drugstore. I telephoned Zachary.

"Would you like Norman to come back to work very soon?"

"If it's a hold-out you're holding," he snapped, "I can't pay a cent more. If all this is front-page stunting, you can quit. It won't do you good. Not any."

"The guy is really sick, Zach. But you can help. I got to have some pictures."

I told him what I wanted, giving a phony physicians' conference as a reason. "Will you telephone him, Zach?"

"You skip back and see that dope Dunhill," he said. "He can't do this to me."

Lily and I had a coke, and before we got away from the counter three girls and a small boy came over to ask if she was Anna May Wong. They were all a little sore because she denied it.

When we entered Dunhill's office again, he jumped up and shook hands. "Al, I've reconsidered. The Museum can hardly enforce a rule when a man's life is at stake. You're welcome to borrow the film. A deposit will be necessary, of course."

"I'll mail you a check as soon as I get to the office. You'll get it tomorrow."

"That is satisfactory, Al. Come on down to the vaults."

We filled the back of my car with cans of film, Dunhill shook hands again with me, but didn't nod even to Lily, and we took off. "Where now?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Here's something I hadn't thought of, Al. We don't know how much film we have to get. Some of it has been destroyed, there's all the stuff that's lost in the cutting room or otherwise thrown away. I think we'd better stack this somewhere until we accumulate every foot in existence. My father mentioned this, but I'd forgotten it. Here's the point: he's got to have more than fifty percent of his soul. That much will then attract the remainder that is still in existence. We don't know what percentage is represented by undestroyed film, nor how much of that film we can get by hook or crook. So we better have the whole works in one pile, in hope that if it isn't really enough, the impetus of its destruction will carry over and drag in his soul."

"It's pretty damned complicated, baby. Even if I understood it, I wouldn't believe it. But I've seen one miracle today. Zach put Dunhill through the hoops and made a human being of him for a while."

"He didn't pay much attention to me," she commented. "I was just something to walk around. Speaking of miracles, though, I don't believe it either, Al. If it works, like father says it will, I'll never have my picture taken again. I wonder, Al, I wonder. I wonder if most people are shy when a camera is pointed at them because they have an instinctive knowledge of what it's going to do to them?"

"Count me out," I said. "I don't want any part of such notions."

We lugged the reels of negatives, each in its flat circular can, up to the office and dumped them on the floor. I got on the phone to give Eddie Lanin a kick in the pants.

"Don't grit your teeth," he said. "I petitioned the court, but Dr. Barq is ahead of you with his own petition."

"What kind of petition?"

"For power of attorney."

I chuckled. "Will he be surprised! That's one thing our courts are touchy about, a physician with power of attorney for his patient."

"But it was granted, Al. By Judge Curl."

"But he can't, Eddie!"

"He did, though. What do you want to do? Go to a higher court?"

"What can I do? I haven't got Federal-court dough. I'll call you, Eddie."

I turned to Pat and Lily. "Something's fishy, but we're helpless. Let's take the film back to Dunhill."

"What?" Lily flared. "Over my corpse!"

"But I can't put up the deposit I promised, baby. He'll want it back."

"Let him want. What can he do about it?"

"He'll go to court. The Museum has plenty of money."

"Well, we're not going to take it back, just when we're getting somewhere. Take it over to my apartment. It'll be safe until we get all the rest. You didn't tell us what's the trouble."

I explained about Dr. Barq's petition.

"But why?" Lily said. "Pat pointed out that Norman is useless to him. What's he up to?"

"Maybe he wants Norman's money," Pat suggested. "I would, I think, if I were the doctor."

"He seems to be well heeled," Lily said, "and his prices are high."

"You're still thinking of him as a ghoul," I pointed out. "If he were . . . if there are such things . . . he'd want no truck with Norman. But if he's a chiseler, he'd like to sign checks on bank accounts. Norm has a nice piece of change salted away."

"Let's go see what goes on, Al. We'll drop this film at my place, and call on the good doctor."

"Hold down the fort, Red. We'll call you, and pick you up in time for dinner."

We were stopped at the gate. The attendant didn't even change expression when we swore at him, when we identified ourselves, or when we threatened to get police aid in calling on Norman. He gave us a steady, dark, blank stare, and repeated, like a gouged record:

"You are not to be admitted."

Lily yanked out her Contax and snapped several shots of him. "I'll remember you," she said.

We held council over the dinner table later. "Something is less than kosher," Lily said. "We better find out."

"Why don't you get the films together and forget Dr. Barq?" Pat asked. "Restoring Norman is the important thing."

"It is not," Lily snapped. "Getting Al's money back is the important thing. He promised to marry you, and he will or I'll beat his brains out against a newel post. Bringing Norman back to this world is just the first step."

"In order to do that, we have to get him out of that joint," I said.

"You say it so easily," Lily cracked.

Pat put down her knife and fork and placed both luminous hands against her throat. "I'm sick."

My heart turned half over, then back. "What's the matter, Red?"

"I think I ought to go to a sanatorium, Al."

"What's the *matter?*"

"Then," she said, grinning elfinly, "I could keep an eye on Dr. Barq and maybe find out what he's trying to do."

"Oh, no," Lily said. "Oh, no. We don't let you inside those walls."

"No, it's out, Red. We don't know enough about the doc."

"But I wouldn't be in any danger, and I might be of some help."

"Let's don't talk about it, Red. I suggest we go about collecting film tomorrow. Maybe we can get enough for the trick before anything breaks."

We did more running around and got less done in the next three days than a cageful of spinning mice. We learned two things: You can't get negatives from a studio vault, and you can't keep 'em if you do.

Zachary could have loaned the negatives from his studio. He was the current white-haired lad, with unlimited backing and a huge production schedule outlined. Top of the heap, and all that, and he would have done it if the little matter of a check to Dunhill hadn't come up.

"You got to play with fairness," the slim little man told me and Lily. "Me, I don't fret if you chisel Dunhill, but when I tell him it's O. K. and you run around him, you got me on a spot."

"But listen, Zach. Something went wrong. I intended to send him a check as a deposit, but I suddenly ran short of cash. You know how that can happen."

"God forbid!" he said fervently.

"Believe me, Zach, it's important to get the negatives of Norman's pictures, even if I double-cross every studio in town. If you want him to make another million for you, you better help."

He leaned back in his chair, folded manicured hands across his sports shirt and stabbed me with his keen black eyes. "I want him to work, all right, Al. But I don't get it how negatives can do it."

"I'm not clear on it myself, Zach, but I know it's worth trying. Please help, Zach. You won't regret it. Look, I'm gambling everything I've got, to make Norman well. If I fail, I might as well start peddling needles door to door. I'll lose what actors I'm handling, and never get another. And I don't have to do this, Zach. I could leave it alone."

"Like I'm going to, Al."

We argued for nearly an hour, with me fandancing all around the real reason why I wanted the film, but he wouldn't budge. I had let him down, and the Museum was sore at him.

"A man can't afford no more enemies than he can't help keeping, Al. I can't take a chance on pulling strings and getting tangled in 'em myself."

I got up. "I can't blame you, I guess. Come on, Lily, we'll try it on our own."

"Just a moment," she said, and turned to Zach-

ary. "My little sister thinks you are the greatest man in the world, M. Zachary. You would give her great pleasure if I could take her some trifle that has belonged to you."

It wasn't the words so much as Lily's tone, I guess. It simply dripped. "You great big wonderful man, you," and Zachary wallowed in it a little. He beamed at Lily.

"My wrist watch?" he suggested.

Lily gasped, flung up an ivory hand. "Nothing so magnificent. That would make her shy and unhappy." She pointed at his head. "If you'll pardon me, you have a wild lock of hair over your left ear. If I could cut it off?"

Zachary took a small mirror from his desk, examined his reflection. "My looks would get better, too," he said. "Sure. You got scissors?"

"No, but I will have in a second."

She went out, returned almost immediately, clipped the black lock, and we left. Lily stowed the hair in an envelope which she borrowed from Zachary's secretary.

"If we don't get anywhere by ourselves," she said as we drove off the lot, "this may come in handy."

We didn't get anywhere. Some of my friends in various studios were willing to let me borrow some film, but when I had to explain that I couldn't put up a deposit, they just stared as if I were a visiting relative.

Then, just to put a top on three wasted days, a process server handed me a subpoena to appear the following morning before Judge Curl and show cause why I should not return the Dunhill film.

"So," I said to Lily, going up to the office in the elevator, "that's the works. The whole thing was screwy, anyway. All we've done is to give me a bad name and advertise the fact that I'm broke."

"We're not through," she said. "We haven't started to fight yet."

"I'm through. What you do is your own affair. I'm returning the film."

"Oh, no. Remember, it's in my apartment. If you try to break in and get it, I'll have you pinched, Al."

I waited until we were out of the elevator, then took her arm. "You're not serious."

"Deadly."

"You can't do that to me, Lily. You'll get me in jail."

"We'll see. I don't think you'll suffer, but even if you do I'm going through with this."

"But why?"

"You're going to marry Pat, and you're going to get back all the money you've spent on Norman. The only way you can do it is to restore Norman's soul."

"Pat won't like marrying a convict."

"I'll keep you out of jail, too."

"That'll be a neat trick."

The first thing we saw when we went into the office was a note from Pat:

You and Lily aren't getting anywhere. I've got an idea. I'm at Dr. Barq's.

Lily caught my arm as I wheeled toward the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To get Pat, of course."

"Why?"

"She's so helpless. She'll get herself hurt."

"That isn't the story you gave out the other day. She was a tough little mick then."

"That was different," I said. "I was on the other side of the argument then."

"What makes you think she might get hurt?"

"I don't trust Dr. Barq."

"Why not? Are you beginning to believe he's a ghoul?"

"No, but—"

"But you'll admit he may be?"

"Nuts, I admit nothing. I'm upset, that's all. The girl I— Well, damn it, I love her, and I want to be sure she's all right, see? As long as she's in that joint I can't be sure. So I'm getting her out."

"Wait a minute, Al. You and I are *persona non grata* with Dr. Barq. Just suppose, then, that he is a Soul Eater. If he finds that you or I are connected with Pat, or have any personal interest in her, what would happen?"

That stopped me. It shouldn't have, but it stopped me. Not that I gave any houseroom to Lily's contention that the doc might be a ghoul, but still—

"Yeah. I don't believe it, Lily, but there's one chance in a million, maybe, that you might have tagged him. I won't take even that chance. What have I got a lawyer for, if not to do things like this?"

"And don't forget to tell him about the subpoena," she reminded as I dialed Eddie Lanin's office.

"Get her out," I told Eddie. "She's had some kind of brain wave, and all she'll get is trouble. You get her out. I'll take care of the spanking, myself."

I told him about the jam I was in with Dunhill, and he said he'd show up at court the next morning. He said he'd call me back on Pat, and I paced the floor for fifteen minutes before the phone rang.

"I'm afraid nothing can be done about Pat tonight, Al. She's there, all right. But the report is that she has a serious mental disorder, is in a critical condition, and can't be seen even by

her mother. We can take legal steps tomorrow, but we can't get a court order now, at six o'clock."

"But we've got to, Eddie! She hasn't any mental disorder. There's something phony."

"But, Al, we can't prove it tonight."

"I can prove it by getting her out."

"Wait, Al! Don't hang up. If you're thinking of snatching her, don't. You'll get in jail on so many counts the trial will take a year for preliminary hearing."

"I'm not impressed, Eddie."

"Al, believe me, you'd better be. You can't break into a hospital and throw your weight around. If you don't wind up in a padded cell, or get killed, you'll get pinched. Besides, how do you know the report isn't true? Maybe she *has* a mental kink. You don't know."

"Listen, Eddie. I got troubles enough without worrying whether my fiancée is crazy or not. I know, see? She's all right, and she's being held there against her will."

I slammed down the receiver and headed for the door. "Go on home," I told Lily. "I'm going to be busy."

"You'll get her killed, that's what you'll do."

I halted. "All we do is talk. I'm going to do something for a change."

"Al, listen once more. Dr. Barq is a reputable man. If his place gives out a report on a patient, he's got to be able to back it up. By the time you could bust in to see Pat, she *would* have a serious mental disorder. You can bet what you ever hope to have on that. In the meantime, though, she won't be in danger as long as she isn't identified as your intended. Tomorrow, we can take more subtle steps to get her out."

"But I can't just sit around and do nothing all night."

"You won't have to, Al. I'll furnish plenty of action. Come on over to my apartment."

Nothing much registered on me. I drove automatically to Lily's place. She did some talking, and cautioned me once about a red light, but I didn't hear what she said and I ran through the light, anyway.

She fixed me a drink and disappeared into another room. When she came back, she had on the ceremonial robes again. She was a priestess once more, slender, haughty, and tall. All the ancient dignity of her race was in her masklike face, blank black eyes, and the liquid stiffness of her walk. On her upturned palms she carried a doll as if it were a platter.

"What the hell?" I said.

She turned her inscrutable face toward me. "I am going to torture Zachary. I shall not kill him."

"Why?"

"He will pay for the Museum film, and also give us what we need."

I got to my feet. "I know enough crazy people. Good-by."

"This is for Pat, too."

"Try and make sense, Lily."

"Look," she said, nodding at the doll. "I made this, and used Zachary's lock of hair in the making. What I am going to do with it is simple and harmless, but frightening enough to force Zachary to grant our demands."

The thing was crude enough, fashioned of ordinary knickknacks you find in any home, yet it had that strange grace and beauty which comes, I suppose, from the oldest racial artistic heritage. Its painted face and rice-paper robe would have seemed ridiculous in any other language.

"Is this black magic?" I asked. "If so, good-by."

"Oh no, Al. It's simply the application of certain laws my ancestors have known for thousands of years."

"Are you going to stick pins in it? If so, I'm going."

"No. Please sit down, Al."

She laid the doll on a little table, and knelt beside it. She spoke a few Chinese phrases, and made a few graceful passes in the air. Then she took two feathers from the sleeves of her bright robe.

She tickled the doll. Not as you and I would, no. She made a ritual of it, and a pattern. She didn't just wiggle the tips of the feathers against the soles of the doll's button feet. I got a distinct impression that the doll had identity for her. For her, it lived.

She tried to surprise it. Not fiendishly, but with a perfectly blank face and expressionless eyes.

You've seen a cat play with a mouse? How it pretends indifference as the mouse scurries toward a hole, or a bush, or a dark corner? How it waits until the mouse has almost reached safety, then pounces with tender speed, brings it back and turns it loose again?

Lily pounced, so to speak. She knelt motionless until I thought she'd given the matter up, then with sudden blurred motion she tickled the doll with both feathers, one in each hand. Then motionless again.

This went on for half an hour, and became so realistic that I jumped, cringed, and shuddered each time she made a blur of her hands. When she put down the feathers and got to her feet, I was sweating all over.

"Now," she said, "will you telephone Zachary and tell him that you're responsible for this? You know what to say after that."

"I'll sound like a fool. This doll has no relation to Zachary, on the other side of town. I

don't believe anything happened, and I refuse to be connected with whatever it was. Even if that does sound mixed up, I mean it."

"Please, Al. If you want to get your problem worked out, you'll have to co-operate."

"This sort of thing is illegal, Lily. I'm breaking no laws."

"But you were anxious to barge out and do a spot of kidnaping a few minutes ago."

"That was dif— Oh, hell! It's lucky I've got his unlisted phone number in my little book."

I got Zachary on the phone and didn't know what to say except hello.

"Well?" he snapped. "Who is calling?"

"This is Al, Zach."

"So it's Al, Al. So what are you cooking?"

"How do you feel, Zach?"

"I'm feeling late. I got to make a speech at the Roosevelt, and I got nothing but lost shirt studs. So what is it, Al? What do you want?"

"Do you feel all right, Zach? You don't tickle?"

"Again, please?"

"Do you tickle anywhere?"

"Do I tickle *what?*"

"You. Yourself."

"I'm a busy man, Al. I got better things to do. Now tell me, what is it? I'm hurrying when possible."

"It isn't important, Zach. I'll call you tomorrow."

I hung up and turned to Lily. She had plenty of expression now. She was puzzled.

"Shall I call up some more people?"

"Don't be nasty, Al. Something's wrong."

"I'm getting a fine reputation," I went on. "I steal film and I call people up to ask if they tickle. What'll you think of next?"

"Please be quiet, Al. Let me think."

"Go ahead. But if you come up with any new ideas, I'll sock you."

She stood straight and still, and closed her eyes. Presently she said, "Do you know where he lives?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether there's a big church between us and him?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"Very serious. If the church were big enough, and were directly in line, and near enough to him or us, this business wouldn't work."

Whether there was anything to it or not, she was serious, so I thought about it.

"No, I can't think of a church."

"Maybe he wears a toupee. If this hair is

false, it wouldn't work. Do you know?"

"His hair is his own."

"Then we'd better go in as straight a line as we can to his house, and look for a church."

I remembered something that was relevant, but it wouldn't take form in my mind.

"Be quiet," I said. "Let *me* think, for a change." Just as I said it, I remembered. "Look. You know about the fad—I suppose that's what you'd call it—for bringing old European castles and stuff over here in pieces and reconstructing them? Well, the guy who lived in Zachary's house before him, the guy who built it . . . uh, I seem to remember that he had shipped the stones from a big house or palace over here. It had been occupied by a man who either became a Pope or was considered for the position."

Lily's eyes sparkled. "Then it was consecrated. Well! That's a relief. All we have to do is get him out of it."

"He's probably already out of it. He was in a stew to get to a banquet."

I told her about it, and much against my better judgment was soon headed for the hotel.

Since I had agreed to play the game by Lily's rules, I didn't ask any questions. I went into the grill, called the desk from the public phone, and asked to have Zachary paged.

"He'll be in the dining room adjoining the bar," I told the clerk.

Three or four minutes later, he was on the wire. "This is Al again, Zach. I want to tell you something."

"Listen, Al. If you want to get drunk, that's your headache. But why hitch me to it? I got to make a speech."

"I'm sober, Zach. I want to warn you. If funny things happen to you while you're speaking, it's me that's doing them. Remember that."

"What kind of funny, Al?"

"Any kind. I hate to do this, Zach, but I want you to square the beef with Dunhill, and I want all the negatives from yours and other studios. If you'll agree now, you won't suffer any embarrassment."

"Al, you're a good guy and I like you from friendship. But quit bothering me. That's my final word."

He hung up, and I went into the bar where Lily had taken a stool at the far end against the wall. Her robe and the doll she carried didn't get even a second glance from the sprinkle of customers. This was Hollywood.

I pretended not to see her, and took a seat at the bar from which I could see into the room where a banquet was in progress. Zachary came back from the lobby and took his place at the table. He began to eat.

Lily set the doll before her, took the straw from her Cuba Libra and blew into the doll's ear. I shifted my eyes to Zachary and saw him flinch and twist a finger in his ear. Lily blew into the other ear and Zach put down his fork to use his left hand. Lily alternated from one ear to the other, and Zach went through some complicated motions which brought glances from the banqueters and caused words I couldn't hear between him and the young men sitting on either side of him.

To the casual eye, Lily was simply toying with an odd little manikin. The bartender watched her with amusement between wiping glasses and refilling. She apparently tired of the straw technique and laid it aside. She sipped at her drink, then fished out an ice cube and set the doll on it.

Zach rolled his dark eyes furtively around the banquet table, twisted uncomfortably in his chair, suddenly jumped to his feet. While some twenty persons eyed him with puzzled interest, he rubbed his seat, shivered, and examined his chair. Finding nothing there, he sat down again. He instantly shot to his feet once more, with a somewhat wild look in his eyes.

Lily pushed the ice cube to one side, and when Zach reseated himself his face took on an expression of purring relief. But not for long. Lily twisted her cocktail napkin to a point and tickled the doll's feet, as she had with feathers in her apartment. She had the cat and mouse technique again, and even though I couldn't feel a thing, I jumped with Zach.

His feet were hidden by the table, but from the contortions the visible part of his body went through, I could imagine him jerking first one foot, then the other, then both from the floor and attempting to sit on them. A harried expression began to grow on his face.

In rapid succession, Lily used the straw, the ice cube, and the napkin, and Zach put on an act that any circus would headline. It wasn't the fact that his twitching overturned all the glassware within reach that was spectacular, nor his bouncing out of his chair. But when he jumped up on the long table and danced on breaking dishes, the table began to empty. Diners got up, took a last look at his fancy footwork, and filed firmly out to the bar. A few looked back at him dancing on the deserted table, but most of them ordered drinks and downed them hurriedly.

Lily continued the tickling for nearly fifteen minutes, and Zach's gyrations took on a note of hysteria as waiters began to gather and make futile efforts to arrest his dervish spinning. Customers from the bar, and guests from the lobby added to the throng, and the dining room was soon pretty well filled with people who watched Zach and the busy waiters in hushed and puzzled silence.

Lily stopped tickling the doll, and Zach, with a finel pirouette, collapsed among fragments of chinaware and untouched food. He only writhed a little when Lily stuck the ice cube against the doll's stomach. He was tired.

I joined the spectators and waiters, and presently Zach's rolling eyes fixed on me.

"Al," he moaned. "Al."

He sat up and attempted to brush roast and gravy from his shirt front, celery from his hair, and a green salad off his vest. Lily joined me as I went over to the table, and as Zach in sudden pain pressed hands against his stomach, green salad and all, I saw that Lily had the point of a toothpick buried in the stomach of the doll.

"Wassa malla you?" she asked him. "Clooclumbers makee bellyache?"

Zach groaned. "I'm ruined! Get me outa here!"

"We'll take you home, Zach. Can you walk?"

"Make dancing," Lily said. "Velly fine."

She took the toothpick away, and the drawn look went off Zach's face. He got off the table and kept eyes on the floor while waiters wiped him with napkins.

"You dlunk?" Lily asked. "You been dlinkee?"

"*Shh!*" I cautioned her. "It could happen to anybody. Come on, Zach. A good night's sleep'll fix you up."

He swept the whispering, giggling audience with a black glance. Then he hung his head and walked quickly through the lobby, with me and Lily on either side.

We piloted him to my car, helped him in, and I got into gear. We crawled along with boulevard traffic until I cut down a side street and headed for my place.

"Thanks for getting me outa there, Al."

"It's all right, Zach. Glad to be of service."

After a long silence, he said, "What was all this stuff you gave me on the phone?"

"What stuff?"

"Didn't you call me at the hotel?"

"No, Zach. Lily and I just happened to drop in at the bar for a drink, and we saw you. You shouldn't drink so much."

"I didn't drink nothing!" he snapped. "Didn't you call me? Honest?"

"Honest. We just finished making the rounds of studios, and went into the bar. Then we saw you."

"Well, what did you mean when you called me at home?"

"What are you talking about? I didn't call you."

"Yes, wassa malla you?" Lily demanded.

Zach put his head in his hands. "I'm confused."

"While we're on the subject, Zach," I said quickly, "I intended to call you in the morning. I'm about to be in a legal jam. Will you put up a deposit on Dunhill's film, and will you get those negatives I wanted?"

"For the last time—" he began.

Lily made a motion which I caught from the tail of my eye, and Zach clapped both hands to his stomach.

"It ain't decent," he moaned, "what happens to me. Are you doing this, Al? If you are, put a name on the price, and I'll do it."

I stopped in front of my apartment house. "Do you want to come up for a drink? We'll talk about it."

He hesitated. Lily moved her hands again, and he winced. "O. K., O. K., Al. Only stop this business. I can't take much more."

"I'm not doing anything. What happened to you?"

He glanced at Lily and dropped his eyes. "Even if I could tell you with ladies present, you wouldn't believe me."

"Wassa malla you?" Lily asked again, then giggled. "Come on, boys. There is work to do."

We went inside, and when I opened my door there was a rush of feet across the floor and Pat was clinging to me, red head buried on my chest, arms tight around me.

"Al, Al! I'm so scared, Al!"

"Take it easy, Red. Everything's all right now."

I heard a crash behind me. Zach had collapsed.

Beside him in the corridor lay the little manikin in its rice-paper robes, and above the two stood Lily, her face full of exasperation.

"Damn it!" she said. "I dropped the thing when I saw Pat. Come on, both of you. He may have a concussion. The doll landed on its head."

The shock was good for Pat. She snapped out of her shivers and helped us drag Zachary inside; she shut the door and stood ready to take instructions while I felt for his pulse. He was alive, but a wide bruise marked his forehead, a bruise which corresponded to a depression in the skull of the doll.

"This is new to me," I told Lily. "I've never seen anything like it, and I don't know what to do."

"Nor I," she replied. "I've been doing what my father told me. Let's get him in a bed. Maybe he'll come out of it if we just leave him alone."

"I'd rather he just had a plain hit in the head," I said. "We could call a doctor for that. Maybe you'd better get your father up here."

"He won't come. He won't even see motion pictures, much less get mixed up with movie people."

"O. K. Give me a hand."

We put Zach in my bed, where he lay breathing heavily. His breathing got easier when Lily mut-

tered some Chinese over the doll and stroked its forehead, but he didn't come out of it. We looked down at him for a while, then Lily put the doll carefully on the floor and we went back into the living room.

"What happened?" she asked Pat.

Pat started, shuddered, and clung to me again. "It was pretty awful. They put me in a room across the hall from Norman's. I pretended to be in bad shape after they found me wandering around the grounds and was watched so closely I had a hard time hiding my flower of garlic under my pillow."

"Your what?"

"If he was a ghoul," Pat said, "garlic would stop him. Anybody knows that."

"Go on."

"So I pretended to go to sleep and the nurses went away. I opened my door a crack and pulled the bed to where I could watch Norman's door. Sure enough I saw somebody go in. I supposed it was Dr. Barq. Is he tall and thin, with a face that . . . that make you feel funny?"

"It's the eyes," I said. "They're what make you feel prickly."

"What did you do?" Lily asked.

"Well, when he went in he didn't stop like you normally do to close the door. I could see he just gave it a shove and kept on walking. I knew the bedroom was inside, beyond the first room, so I slipped across the hall and into the sitting room. I was very quiet. A cat couldn't have heard my bare feet on that cork flooring. I sneaked over to the bedroom door and peeked around it."

Pat stopped for a moment. She didn't shiver again. She didn't do anything but stare at the wall. Not that she seemed to see anything, even the wall. She just stared.

"He was standing over the bed," she went on. "He wasn't doing anything. He looked down at Norman, and he had no expression on his long dark face, but his hands were clenched. He hated Norman. I could feel it, like a wall. But Norman couldn't, I don't think. He didn't even look at Dr. Barq. All he did was try to put the tips of his fingers on one hand against the fingers on his other hand, like a baby trying to put its foot in its mouth.

"I guess I must have made a noise when I went out, because I heard feet behind me."

She shuddered here, and so did I. Lily, I think, felt some of the chill, too.

"I didn't scream," Pat said. "I couldn't. I tried, but I was paralyzed for a second, and the feet came closer in a rush. Then I was able to run, I guess. I guess I ran, because the next thing I remember I was shoving the flower of garlic at him and crying, 'Go away, go away, go away!' and he was backing toward the door of my room. You should have seen his face. I'll dream about those eyes, and the twisted mouth. He was livid. Hold me, Al! Don't let me go!"

She buried her head on my shoulder again, and I held her tightly. Presently the tension went out of her, but she made no move to pull away.

"Why did you go out there, Red, in the first place?"

"I thought maybe I could learn something that would help clear up Norman's trouble, and then we could get married like we planned."

"And all you did was scare yourself half to death. How did you get away?"

"I snatched my clothes as I passed the closet where the nurse had hung them and followed Dr. Barq down the corridor until I came to a door. Then I ran. I heard people come after me just about the time I reached the fence, but they were hunting in another part of the grounds. So I put on my clothes real quick, climbed through the fence and hitched a ride from a vegetable farmer. He brought me here. I waited with the lights on. I thought you'd never show up."

I stroked her hair. "It's all right now, Red. Stop trembling. Everything's under control."

I looked at Lily, and added, with my lips only: "I hope."

Her eyes looked like black marble. "We've got to get Norman out of there."

"Why? How?"

"As to why, because you and I can't get in like other people. Dr. Barq doesn't want us there, for reasons of his own. As to how, we'll have to kidnap him."

"We can't carry him, and he can't walk, even if we could get in. Which we can't."

"Pat got in. She knows how. She got out, too. And as for carrying him, we don't have to. I know a trick worth four of that."

"Why not leave him there? He seems safe enough."

Lily sighed. "Can't you understand we're bucking the Soul Eater, Al? It's a copper-riveted cinch that Dr. Barq doesn't want Norman to get his soul back. As long as Norman is soulless, and alive, Dr. Barq can retain his power of attorney and bleed Norman's estate. The proof is the hatred Pat felt as Dr. Barq looked down at Norman."

"I don't follow that."

"Look," Lily said patiently. "The doctor is a ghoul. Pat proved that. Do you follow that?"

"Well, I'll grant it for the sake of argument."

"Al, stop this literal denial of things you don't understand. Just because you're not conditioned to 'em doesn't mean they can't exist. Well, anyway, you'll grant he's a ghoul. He knows that Norman has no soul. He must know that his soul isn't destroyed, because he surely saw the change

in Norman after we burned that negative. That hatred Pat felt, I'll bet four dollars, is not at Norman, but at his own helplessness to locate the soul and absorb it."

"This is all guesswork."

"Surely, but what evidence we have supports it as a theory. Now. You can bet the doctor believes that you and I are working to restore Norman to completeness. He'll keep close tab on Norman's condition. If we get the negatives together and free Norman's soul, the doctor will be happy as a wolverine to eat it. He then knows where it is and can keep Norman a kind of zombi as long as desirable. When it's no longer desirable, Norman will die physically. What am I making a speech for? Take it from me, we got to get him out of there and put him in a safe place."

"All right. What do we do?"

"We buy up all the garlic in town."

"Before I crawl out on any more limbs, Lily, I want to know something. If you can convince me, then I'll agree to your latest screwy notion. How do you know Dr. Barq suspects that we have any interest in Norman—I mean, any more than the ordinary interest that an agent would show toward his friend and client?"

"I *don't* know it for certain, Al. But look at the evidence. Dr. Barq applied for and got a power of attorney from Judge Curl. Right?"

"Mm-m-m."

"Dr. Barq, if memory serves, is a trustee of the Museum. Check?"

"I didn't know that."

"I've heard it, I'm pretty sure. All right, what happens? We . . . ah, borrow some film from the Museum and we get called up before Judge Curl to explain why. Now look. In the first place, the courts will never grant power of attorney to a patient's physician. That's logical and fair. But Judge Curl does, so something looks phony. Added to that, you are to appear before this same judge. It's more than coincidence, Al, and I feel that Dr. Barq is behind it."

"It's pretty thin, baby, but it's something. O. K., I'm with you. What about Zach?" I nodded at the bedroom door.

"He'll be safe here. We won't be long."

So we bought practically all the garlic in Hollywood.

The Hollyfax Market: arc lamps on the sidewalk, stabbing a veil of fog; hillbilly entertainers, stabbing your eardrums with sharp blades of nasal harmony.

"We want some garlic," I told the Japanese vegetable man.

He spread a smile between his ears. "Garric, how much, prease?"

"All you've got."

"Ah? Have too much. Busher basket full. How much you want?"

"The whole works."

"Ah, so? Will never use, misser. Too much."

"Wassa malla you?" Lily snarled. "You savvy Inglis? Gollic you got, gollic we buy. You savvy? You bring, chop chop!"

As he scurried away, I said, "Cut out that coolie chatter. You speak better English than I do."

"I think it's cute," Pat said.

"That's just the trouble. She's got a Ph. D in languages, and uses the sloppiest English in town. Cute!"

"Hush yo' mouf," Lily said fiercely. "Time's a-wastin'."

We threw the bag of garlic in the car and buzzed off to the next market, where a Greek waited on us. Then an Italian, Chinese, Armenian, Jew, Hindu, and an Irishman goggled from their respective vegetable stands, and a man with phony Oxford enunciation at the Purchasers' Protective Market where the potatoes were displayed under plate glass.

"Listen," I said to Lily, "we got enough garlic to . . . to— We got enough garlic. There's no more room inside, on top, on the fenders or bumpers. What are you trying to do, corner the market?"

Lily surveyed the car, which had a lumpy, moving-day look. "If we don't have enough, we can come back for more. I'd like to do it in one trip, though."

"If we buy any more, every French and Italian restaurant in town will close its doors tomorrow. What are you planning for this spic-spice?"

"We're going to build a wailing wall. Detour by my place on the way to the ghoul's guest house."

"What have you got in mind, Lily?"

"I want to get some stuff. You agreed to let me play general in this war."

"Yes. I'll stick to it."

The stuff proved to be her Gladstone bag—with its altar, robe, altar lamp, and incense—and a can of film. She refused to explain, and we drove across the hills into the valley and headed for Dr. Barq's sanatorium.

"You know how it is on an unlighted country road? Within the throw of your headlights, you've got a warm and comfortable world. You know what's there, you can see it. Outside that fan of light is—what? You get the impression that it's seething with rabbits, for they bounce into the light and across the road to vanish with their powder-puff bottoms into the empty darkness.

Empty, ordinarily.

Not tonight. In spite of myself, I felt that things packed the darkness beyond the briefly lighted fence posts, the occasional amorphous sil-

houette of low hills. They didn't have definite form, but somehow they all looked like Dr. Barq. There were eyes, sure. Unseen, but seeing.

It's what you can't see in the dark that makes you afraid, that drops a hush over you and your companions. You don't fear what you see. You can organize a defense. You don't fear what you hear. You can identify the sound, and your memory supplies its form, and your defense is built. But those forms you can't quite see, and the sounds which are just below the level of consciousness can drive you screwy.

I hung to the steering wheel. It was solid, a part of my everyday world. I pushed the car beyond the safety mark, so as to get through this thick and pulsing darkness as soon as possible. I'd been through here by day, and I *knew* what was out there beyond my lights. Over and over I itemized the hills, a clump of trees, a ranch, a field of beans. But I clung to the steering wheel.

Because what assurance did I have that those objects were there now? Sure, they were plain to see by daylight. But are they still there at night? How do you know? You can find out by stopping the car and walking over to see with a flashlight, but what's beyond its beam?

That's the way I felt on the empty country road.

Pat and Lily must have felt it, too. Or maybe they were busy with private thoughts, or scared because I was driving too fast. At any rate, they were as quiet as I.

When the white sign, arrowed with brilliants that indicated the cut-off to Dr. Barq's, showed at the far edge of my lights, I slowed and braked for the sharp turn.

"I think we'd better walk," Lily said.

"O. K."

"Let Pat take us to where she got inside the grounds."

We all took a sack of garlic and with Pat flashlighting us through a thin stand of stunt oak we filed along a tangent which intersected a gap in a high hedge. At the top of a five-hundred-yard slope of lawn perched the sanatorium, pocked with dark, square windows.

We dumped the garlic, left Lily to guard, and Pat and I returned to the car for the first of five trips.

"I'm scared," Pat said, when we had it piled in a shapeless heap. "I'm scared we'll see Dr. Barq. I . . . I don't want to see him again."

"Relax," Lily advised. "Gonna fix his wagon in a minute. First, we put a ring around his rookery, and leave no chink unfilled." She paused, repeated thoughtfully. "No chink unfilled. I'm hungry."

At her direction, we placed pod after pod end to end around the grounds. It took quite some time, with only a bent-wire moon and pale stars for light, and when we met again at the gap we were on the tag end of the graveyard shift.

Lily lighted her altar lamp, donned her robes, and erected her altar.

"Please to be quiet," she said. "The gods will listen to the devout, but not to the empty chatter of children."

We were quiet. There was something about Lily Kung, priestess.

The altar lamp flame rippled over the sheen of Lily's robe, was bright and steady on the film can as she held it motionless for a moment. Then she removed the reel, unwound the film and let it fall on the ground in a twisted glittering heap of ribbon.

She knelt, pronounced her Chinese curse and prayer, and put flame to the film.

It burned hot, bright, and fast, flaring against the dark, loosing acrid smoke on the small wind. Lily jumped to her feet, dropped the robe, and kicked an almost-empty sack.

"Grab a handful of garlic and come on. If I'm right, Norman will be able to walk if we steer him, and Dr. Barq will be sick enough to keep the skeleton staff busy till we get Norman away. But hurry!"

We hurried up the lawn, a clutch of garlic in our hands. We were not challenged at the door, nor in the first-floor corridors. But from above, sounds drifted down.

These were moans, half screams, and the voice was Dr. Barq's. Their timbre chilled my blood, gave me a skinful of duck bumps. We hurried to Norman's rooms, turned on the lights, and entered his bedroom.

He was there, all right. It was Norman, no doubt about it. But—

Norman, in a waking coma, with volition enough only to place the fingers of one hand against the fingers of the other, was one thing; Norman completely unconscious was another. But this was something else again.

His eyes were dark and bright, like freshly dipped chocolate, and they fixed on Pat. They fed on her shock of bright red hair, her elfin face, green eyes, her small curved body and slender legs. His hands moved, reached for Pat. He raised himself from his pillow and strained for her. He noted Lily and me with one indifferent glance and dismissed us from whatever mind was his at the moment.

He was not like a baby, or a child, or an idiot. No, he was a man, he was Norman Courtney—to a degree. That was the impression I had under the indirect wall lights: he was incomplete. It was not adolescence, not a man without an arm or a leg—it was Norman without a part of Norman. The feeling was subtle. It didn't sock

you between the eyes. But it made you weak, and a little crawly.

Pat felt it, probably more than I, certainly more than Lily. She cringed a little, but stood her ground. I could almost hear her thoughts: "We've got to get him out. That's the main thing. Snap out of it. We can deal with this animal light in his eyes later. We've got another job now. Stick out your chin and help, stupe."

And she did. None of us spoke. We fell into practical figured action. Pat beckoned Norman, and he scrambled out of bed. He made a gesture toward moving on all fours, but straightened. He went toward her on bent legs, arms swinging loosely. She kept beyond reach, led the way outside, and Lily and I kept firm hands on each of Norman's arms.

With the sound of Dr. Barq's screams fading behind us we rushed down the lawn to the hedge gap, and through the woods to the car.

"You drive, Red. I'll get in the back with Norman."

"Me, too," Lily said.

"No. You get in front, but face us. If Norman gets out of hand, you can push him in the face."

We started, with Lily facing us. She knelt on the seat, with elbows on its top, and the wind blew her straight black hair around her face. She was not a Chinese priestess, she was not an American girl, short skirt swinging around pretty legs, she was a witch.

She apparently frightened Norman, when he noticed her. Mostly he was reaching for Pat, and mostly I was slapping him gently back into place. But now and then he'd notice Lily and cower in his corner until Pat got his attention again.

"I don't get it," I told Lily. "He wasn't like this when he was . . . uh—"

"Alive?" she supplied. "Don't kid yourself. That's the primal drive. He has just enough of his soul back to make him conscious of the urge to perpetuate the race. Self-preservation is there, too, because he gives up when you slap him or when he looks at me." She added thoughtfully, "I must be pretty."

"All you need," I said, pushing Norman back as we came down the pass into Hollywood, "is a boiling pot and an incantation."

She fixed pin-pointed eyes on Norman, made stirring motions with her hand. "Liver of blaspheming Jew, gall of goat, and slips of yew slivered in the moon's eclipse, nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips," she quoted. "It's my secret, black, and midnight hag's blood. Turn left at the next corner, Pat."

Norman had begun to whimper as she recited the witch's speech in a curdled voice, and before she finished, that one hundred and seventy-five pounds of half man was cuddling against me like a frightened puppy.

I shoved him away, roughly, almost hysterically.

"Stop it!" I snarled at Lily. "You scared me, even. This is a horrid thing that has happened to Norman. It makes my—heart—shrivel—up."

I felt Norman surge forward. He had found Pat again, had forgotten Lily. I slapped him back, gently, and felt better. "Come down off that chandelier," I grumbled, and he twisted his face into a vacuous grin at my tone.

"Right at the next corner," Lily said to Pat.

"Where we headed?" I asked.

"My place."

"Why?"

"To pick up my camera."

"Again, please?"

"He can't be handled, the way he is. I'm going to photograph him."

"I don't get you."

The car was moving slowly now, and Lily pushed hair off her face. "Just think," she said in an awed voice, "how big the human soul must be. Norman has been photographed more than any man in history, and it took forty years of nearly constant exposure to a camera lens to make him an empty shell. That's not the important point, though. We burned one reel of film, and he got back his basic animal instincts—two, anyway. What a difference there is between man and beast. We've reduced that difference to a measurable quantity. Screwy, but measurable."

"In footage?"

"I said it was screwy, but that's the way it stacks up for us; man is so many reels of thirty-five-millimeter film superior to certain animals."

I suddenly had my hands full of Norman again, and dropped out of the conversation as I fought him back into the seat. But the conversation didn't drop out of my mind. I was beginning to believe Lily's theory.

One rectangle of film, properly destroyed, had given Norman a tiny spark. An additional reel had given him a certain consciousness of desires. If the process, when reversed, reduced his consciousness to a measurable degree, I was willing to believe that the savages were right.

Willing to believe, too, that the commandment, "Make no graven image," had the deeper significance which Lily had speculated on.

She took her Gladstone inside, and I kept Norman away from Pat for a few minutes.

"Does he frighten you?" I asked.

Her eyes were big and round. "No, not exactly. I was always fond of him, you know that.

So . . . well, I want to bawl when I see him like this."

"Maybe we'd better drop it, then. Talk about something else. You're driving. You can't blubber and drive at the same time."

"It wasn't so bad," she went on, unheeding, "when he had—just nothing. But now, when I can see how much he *hasn't* got, I want to cry."

Her voice began to tremble, and Norman began to whimper again.

"Stop it, Red!"

"I can't help it," she said. "He's so—pitiful."

Norman shivered in synchronization with his whimpers.

"You're making him worse, Red. Stop it!"

Her back straightened, and she dabbed at her eyes. "Sorry," she said in a steady voice. "He's really the same person, isn't he? It's just as if he isn't quite awake, or something. Here, Norman, give me your hand."

She reached back, and he took her hand in both of his. Then he laid his face against it.

We didn't know Lily had come back until she spoke.

"Well, for pity's sake!" she said. "A touching tableau, if I ever saw one. Why waste sympathy on that hulk?"

She set a couple of small cases on the floor and got in. "Let's go over to Al's. Look, dopes, wait till he *is* somebody before you get dewy-eyed."

"It's not funny to see a friend like this," I snapped.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake!" Lily flared. "He can't comprehend sympathy, or anger, or love, or hate. He isn't anything. Just an empty frame, with the picture missing. You might as well feel sorry for an old piano box."

"I'm more sensitive than that."

"Sensitive, nuts! You're only mawkish. When we get his soul back inside, you can feel sympathy for all the money he'll have to spend. He can appreciate your sympathy then. But why waste emotion on a clod?"

"He was a nice guy," Pat said stoutly.

"Do you think I don't know it?" Lily flared. "But I'm not donating a single sniffle to what he is now. That's what I don't understand about you people. You can get all worked up over something you didn't bring about, and ignore a hell of a lot of things you did. I don't mean you personally. I mean the whole nation. Well—" She paused, grinned. "Wassa malla me? Makee sloap blox spleech, allee same clazee."

She was right, I guess. There was no point in feeling sorry for Norman, but most of us want to protect the helpless things—babies' gallant bumbling, sober ducklings and drunken wide-eyed kittens.

Anyway, I didn't expect Lily to be anything but efficient when it came to getting Norman out of the car and up to my apartment. After her hard-boiled remarks, I was a little amazed by her tenderness in helping Norman to the sidewalk, and by her lashing out at me when I let him stagger once. But I didn't say anything. If she liked a brittle mask, let her wear it.

With Pat leading, all we had to do was guide Norman, and we got inside with no trouble.

"Get him to bed," Lily directed.

We rolled him in beside Zachary, still out and breathing heavily. The bruise on his forehead seemed not so purple as when we had dragged him in out of the corridor, but it was angry enough for anybody's money.

"What about it?" I asked, pointing.

"He'll live," Lily said. "Norman first. Keep him quiet. He may get excited at the lights."

"I'll do it," Pat said.

She sat on the bed and put a slim hand on Norman's forehead. He relaxed and spread a wide grin across his face. He didn't stir while Lily reflected two photofloods on him and mounted a chair to focus her camera.

"I have twenty-six shots on this roll of film," she said, "and four more rolls. You may have to go down to the corner after more. I haven't any idea how much this will require."

She made shot after shot, fast as she could wind film. She made no effort to pose him, and composition was a matter of no importance. If her theory was correct, Norman would eventually revert to the empty hulk he had been after she snapped him for the cover of *Pic.*

Just as he had suddenly collapsed on that occasion, so did something inside him disintegrate now. He remained static under Pat's hand for some two dozen snicks of the camera shutter, and he was dead again.

Dead inside, for he breathed, and his eyes were open. But they didn't roll at Pat, and the grin froze. Lily caught her breath.

"How come?" she said. "We burned a whole reel, and I've used only . . . let's see"—she glanced at the camera—"twenty-three frames. Is this more powerful than a motion-picture camera, or film?"

Pat took her hand away from Norman with a gesture of distaste. "I have an idea. If he appeared in the reel of the picture only for a second or two, it would be the same. You know, like you see a face at the window, or something. Could that be it?"

"Could be," Lily said, "but we'll never know. Oh, well. Let's get to work on Zach. My gosh, seems like all we do is make people conscious or unconscious. You get some sleep, Al. Pat and I will work on the hex victim."

"I'll help."

"You will not. You've got to go to court tomorrow. You need what wits you have. Scram."

She was right. I needed sleep, and it didn't matter about them, so I didn't struggle or assert my masculinity. I kissed Pat good night and collapsed on the living-room couch.

Zach was still out when I left the next morning, and I was a little too weary to care.

All persons having business with this court.

Eddie was there, slim and quick, and Dunhill, supercilious. The Museum attorney, poised and deliberate, was among those present.

So far as I knew, there were all who had business with the court.

I saw no reason whatever for Dr. Barq to show his thin dark face and burnt-amber eyes. I said so.

"What's he doing here?"

"As a trustee of the Museum," Dunhill said rather uncomfortably, "he has a right."

Judge Curl, behind the desk in his chambers, said nothing. Judge Curl was noted for his few words, his strict interpretation of the law's letter, his avoidance of publicity. Well, you could understand why he didn't want that square wooden face before the public, could understand why his billboards and throw-away circulars during election campaigns carried an artist's idealized portrayal of his features. If I had a blank face like that I'd wear a mask, or grow a beard.

The atmosphere was fairly informal. Not that you expected someone to pull a pair of dice from his pants and start a crap game, but all the flags and gavels of courtroom procedure were absent.

Dr. Barq, however, was going to observe the formalities. You could tell by his stiff, well-groomed posture. So I didn't ask how long he had been sick, or how long he had to wait before somebody swept a passage in that ring of garlic. Dr. Barq wouldn't like small talk.

They swore me in presently to tell the truth and nothing but, and the Museum's attorney—Hansen, Bulger, Grimes, I forget his name—asked me why I was acting up. He didn't ask why I didn't return the film, but that's what it stacked up to.

What could I say?

I said it. "I'm trying to save a man's life."

"Whose?" snapped Whoosis.

"Norman Courtney's."

"Why?"

"Why?" I echoed. "Because he's a human being. Because I'm his agent, and have a job waiting for him as soon as he's able to go to work."

"And how can illegal retention of the Museum's property save the life?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"That is for the court to decide."

I looked at Judge Curl. "Honest, your honor, it would be like telling you the ceiling is paved with buttered parsnips. You wouldn't believe it."

Judge Curl asked a question, but for some strange reason I looked at Dr. Barq when I answered.

"Do you refuse to testify?" The judge wanted to know.

I looked at Eddie Lanin. "I—" Something—what?—turned my eyes to Dr. Barq. "No. I

might as well tell it. I don't want to, but—"

Dr. Barq leaned forward.

"What goes on, Al?" Eddie asked.

"You can believe this or not," I said to Dr. Barq—why to him?—"but I know it's true. I can offer proof."

I told them about the magazine covers, how the portrait had faded when Norman's bit of soul was freed from the piece of negative. How the taking of that picture had coincided with his collapse which had baffled the experts. I gave them the theory, and with a sudden flash of recollection, I told them about the Mennonites.

That small religious group are reputed to be the happiest, most evenly balanced group in the world. And—they will not let you take a picture of them.

I cited the peculiar behavior of Hollywood picture people. Even if they are overpublicized, and even if their most normal action assumes greater than its justified importance, they still are not like the rest of us. Is it because they are gradually losing their souls to strips of celluloid? I asked.

"So that's why we want the film," I concluded. "We want every piece we can find with Norman on it. He's a shell now. He isn't a man. He can be, though, and it's only the humanitarian thing to do to let us try. Maybe we fail, but what's the loss of a little film compared to an identity?"

"Loss?" Dunhill put in. "Loss? What are you going to do with it?"

"That's my secret," I said. "We aren't going to destroy it. We only want to borrow it."

"But what if it becomes damaged?"

"Then we'll pay for it."

"No," he said. "Not under any circumstances. I never heard such a preposterous story. The Museum cannot agree to any sort of senseless experimentation with historical documents."

"Your honor," said the Museum attorney, "I think the court has heard enough of this farce."

Before Judge Curl could reply, Lily and Zach followed a knock into the room. Zach was white and drawn, and Lily had lost her bloom. Neither of them stood quite erect.

"Can it please the court," Zach said, "I got something to give out. Excuse the soup stains on my Tuxedo, I had a bad time. I want to tell it here that I will guarantee personal the films, or I'll be paying the full price if they don't come back. And I don't like it, but I will."

He was top dog in Hollywood. Nobody challenged him. They just looked at him. Dunhill relaxed; Dr. Barq watched keenly; and Judge Curl cleared his throat.

"This court," he said in measured words to which Lily's snicking camera played soft obbligato, "has never heard a more fanciful tale. Not only does it refuse to entertain any of the notions introduced here, but it directs the defendant to fulfill his contract with the plaintiff within the next twenty-four hours. Court dismissed."

We filed out, with Zach at my elbow. Dr. Barq alone remained behind with the judge.

"Get it inside your head, Al," Zach said in my ear, "that you're not forcing me to guarantee personal. I'm not scared of your monkeyshines. But I seen some things, Al, and I wanta see more yet. Besides, Norman'll put up the cash when he can add two and two again, like before."

I looked at Lily. "What did you do to him?"

"Gave him his life," she said. "It's the little things that count."

We stopped in a little group in the corridor—Dunhill, Whoosis, Eddie, Zach, Lily, and I.

"Well, Dunhill?" I asked.

"If Mr. Zachary says it's all right, that's good enough for me," Dunhill said. "Eh, Zach? Is that right, old man?"

"I said it, didn't I?" Zach snarled. "I gave it my word personal, didn't I? What more you looking after?"

"That's good enough," Dunhill soothed. "Good enough for me, Zach, old man."

"We'll send you a check," I said, leading Zach away. "And thanks, Eddie. We'll send you one, too."

"Don't bother," Eddie said, falling into step with us, "the story was worth twice my services. I'd like to get in on the ground floor, though, if you've got hold of a good thing."

"Don't be obscure, Eddie."

His thin face became shrewd. "That story, Al. I couldn't have thought up a better one myself. What are you hiding?"

"It was the truth, Eddie, and I can't see why the court acted that way, what with the proof I could offer."

He chuckled indulgently. "O. K., Al, if it's private stuff. But look, just for the sake of argument, suppose it was true. If the judge granted your right to keep the film and get others—good-by Hollywood."

"Shh!" Zach hissed. "Don' even think such things. I got troubles enough."

"I got lost somewhere," Lily put in. "Do me a diagram."

We emerged from the hall of justice and sauntered toward the parking lot. "Don't you get it?" Eddie asked. "If a superior court recognized your theory, the whole umpteen-billion-dollar industry would fold up. Because who would stand in front of a camera if he thought a piece of his soul was going on the negative, umpteen frames a second? You'd have the biggest mess since the Flood. Say," he said suddenly, and

stood still, "you're not really on the level with this, are you?"

"So help me—" I began, but Lily interrupted.

"Wassa malla you?" she asked. "You clazee? Makee dleam talk?"

"I made it up as I went along, Eddie," I said lamely. "I'm sorry I can't let you in on what I've got. Maybe I can later."

So we got rid of Eddie. Lily, Zach, and I got in my car and we started home. "Where's Pat?" I asked.

"Getting some sleep."

"Norman all right?"

"Well," Lily said. "He's empty, and quiet. Which reminds me, I've got to develop this film. Can I use your lab, Mr. Zachary?"

"I'm making it clear," Zach said, "you can take anything I got, and anything I can get for you. But I don't believe it, see? Doing things with mirrors I can take, and I can swallow every time, but this. I'll do whatever you want, but don't ask me to pay attention to it."

"First," Lily said, "we want an estimate of the footage Norman has to his credit. We'd like to have the exact figure, but I suppose that's impossible."

"And don't forget the check to Dunhill," I reminded.

"And then," Lily went on, "we want more than fifty percent of that very film."

"You got to have a truck," Zach said. "If you can get the film."

"If?" Lily cried. "If?"

"Sure. Master negatives is the thing studios think most of. You got stuff from Dunhill, you can have what's in my vaults, but maybe that's got to be plenty."

So that was the way it stacked up. Zach's film added to what we already had made an impressive row of cans in Lily's apartment, but it wasn't enough. We had the figures. They were hard to get, but Zachary put a couple of accountants on the job, and they brought in a close estimate.

We needed three more complete pictures.

We canvassed Quickie Row, and ran down a couple of producers who had a few reels of shorts Norman had made.

We made the rounds of the advertising agencies and secured a few negatives of Norman posing for soap, gum, milk, cigars, liquor, automobiles, golf clubs, perfume—"Norman Courtney likes Vignette perfume on his women friends"—relief funds, mattresses, and Vitamin B-1.

We scoured newspaper offices and picked up shots of Norman getting on planes, trains, and boats; receiving an "Oscar" from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; and we raked up a few publicity stills.

Still we were short.

It proved to be impossible to beg, borrow, or steal master negatives from any but Zach's studio. They are kept in locked vaults, and two or more signatures are necessary to get them out. And for one producer to loan a rival his negatives is like loaning an enemy a new bomb sight. At least, that's the impression you get.

"We're close," I said a few nights later in my apartment after we had fed Norman. "Maybe we have enough. It depends on the amount of his personal footage. That's something we can't tell without examining each reel of film."

"That would be a career," Lily said. "Look! Aren't they about ready to release 'Hickory, Dickory, Death'?"

"I don't think they've made the retakes. But Zach wouldn't let us have an inch of that film. It'll be a box-office smash."

"Maybe he'd let us have a couple of reels of long shots of Norman. They could shoot 'em over with a double."

"Don't suggest it to Zach. You know he thinks we're only borrowing the film. I'll call him, though."

Zach was shocked.

"An A picture?" he gasped. "Not even released. The whole navy couldn't get it out even. It ain't even printed yet. They're printing it tonight. It ain't only impossible, Al, but it can't be done."

Lily took it in stride.

"Let's steal a couple of reels."

"As how, for instance?"

"We'll load the truck at my apartment. We can drive it in the lot O. K. We'll stop at the laboratory entrance, duck inside, grab a couple of cans and tear off to an open spot in the country and burn the stuff."

"It can't be done."

"We can try."

Pat had been silent on the divan, her green eyes thoughtful. "I think you ought to, Al. If you can't do it, then destroy what we have. As you said, it might be enough."

"You'll have to stay here, Red. If it works, and Norman does come to, you'll have some explaining to do."

"Well," she said, "I'm safe. We've got the garlic ring around Norman's bed, and I have a flower for myself."

"Dr. Barq is an unenterprising cuss," Lily said. "He hasn't reported Norman's disappearance to the police, he hasn't bothered us."

"Maybe we're all wrong about him," I suggested.

"No, Al!" Pat said.

I kissed her, Lily patted her red head, and we were off in the truck Zach had loaned us.

We loaded the film, Lily picked up her para-

phernalia, including the roll of film, from her Contax, which Zach had sent over from his lab, and Lily tore off the wrappings.

"Let's take a look at the proofs, Al."

She scanned them hurriedly, and gasped. She was anything but the popular conception of Chinese, with her wide black eyes full of wonder, her full mouth parted.

"Al, look! The guard at the sanatorium registered as a white silhouette, and *so did Judge Curl!*"

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as I checked her whispered statement. The gates of the sanatorium were sharp and clear, but in their center was the white outline of a man, the guard who said woodenly, over and over, "You are not to be admitted."

And Judge Curl. I was in the picture, and the Museum's attorney. But a flat silhouette of Judge Curl's hand extended into one corner of the negative.

"I don't get it," I said. "Don't tell me! I don't want to know."

"No," Lily whispered. "Let's don't talk about it." She tore off the ends of the strip, saving the shots of Norman. "I wanted a picture of you about to be sent to the pen. It would have been an addition to my collection. But I don't want those . . . those—" She broke off. "Let's get going." As I stood frozen, thinking of what the pictures meant, she snapped, "Wassa malla you? You aflaid? You catchee white liver?"

I suddenly got the impression that she never dropped into Pidgin except when she was covering up her own tension. I grinned and walked out. "Come on, baby."

We drove into the lot and I parked by the laboratory entrance. The big sound stages were dark; no work tonight. This was all to the good, as we could make a fast getaway if necessary.

We walked into the labyrinthine entrance to the laboratory. Down a black-lined corridor to a right-angled turn, to another turn, to another turn, and another. This eliminated double doors and tricky locks, as no light rays, even in the brightest sunlight, would make all those turns and ruin film.

We wandered around unheeded under the safety lights among printing machines. We found three cans of "Hickory, Dickory, Death." While Lily engaged the attention of the man nearest, I slipped two under my coat, and we walked out. It was easy. Because it was unprecedented, I suppose.

"Let's don't stop to see Pat," I said.

"Nuts to that!" Lily snapped. "Do you want to worry the poor child to death?"

So we stopped. We ran up from the curb, because I was in a hurry to get it over with. I saw a car halfway down the block that looked something like an ambulance, but didn't give it a second thought at the time.

Once again when I opened the door there was a rush of feet across the room and Pat buried her head on my chest.

"Dr. Barq was here," she whispered. "Oh, Al!"

Lily darted into the bedroom, came back instantly.

"What happened, Pat?"

"N-nothing. I pushed my flower of garlic at him, and followed him down the hall. He went away, and then you came right after. That's why I'm so scared. I didn't have time to calm down."

Lily put an arm around Pat's shoulders. "It'll soon be over, honey. Take it easy. Wassa malla you, you baby?"

Pat threw back her head. In her white face, her eyes were as green as the figured jade disk Lily wore on a delicate chain around her neck.

"I'll be all right," Pat said.

I thought of that ambulance-looking car. "My God!"

Lily followed me at a dead run to the sidewalk, and my first reaction was to sigh with relief. The truck was still there.

Oh, yes, the truck was there, all right. But the doors were open, and a stack of the film cans was missing.

"Down there!" Lily cried, and we broke into a run toward the ambulance where a familiar sleek figure was slamming the rear doors on the sheen of street lamps on tin. Dr. Barq ran around to the front of the ambulance, leaped in, and the machine lurched forward with screaming tires and roaring exhaust.

We wheeled, jumped into the truck after slamming doors, and were after him before he was a block away.

He was a good driver, and began to lose me. He had an advantage, of course—his siren. He swooshed through the intersection of Cahuenga and Hollywood Boulevard behind its full-throated scream, but the light went green before I reached it, and he didn't gain much.

I had no time to look at Lily, but once from the tail of my eye I saw her fingering the flat jade disk at her throat.

"We'll never catch him!" I shouted.

She didn't answer, and we put another hundred yards behind us while the gap between us and Dr. Barq widened a good ten yards. Suddenly she laid a tense hand against my right arm.

"Stop the car!"

"He'll get away. We might catch him if he's held up somewhere by a traffic jam."

"You said you'd play it my way. This is serious, Al. Stop!"

"O. K., but I think there goes the old ball game."

I slowed to a stop, and Lily rummaged in the Gladstone for her robe. She put it on, and her movements became deliberate. She removed the jade ornament, bowed over it and muttered a few words in Chinese. Then, with a manner which made her next move anything but ridiculous, she took lipstick from her purse and pulled off the cap.

She stepped out of the cab and knelt by the rear tire on the street side. She held the jade disk up to street lights and the lights of thick traffic on Cahuenga Boulevard. She carefully copied the Chinese characters on the white side wall of the tire, so that they were an evenly spaced circle of bright clusters.

She got back in the cab and motioned—not ordered—me to drive.

I shrugged. "What's the use? He's on that deserted cut-off by now."

She smiled and bowed her head over the jade. She began to chant in Chinese. The strange rhythm of her phrases continued as I drove over the pass and onto the road to Dr. Barq's sanatorium. She became silent for a few seconds. Then:

"Slow, Al. He might be anywhere along here."

"He? Who? Dr. Barq?"

"Certainly."

"He's at the sanatorium by now. What do we do, ambush him as he comes back?"

"He's not at the sanatorium, Al, if my prayer wheel worked."

I didn't say anything to this. What could I say? But her tone pulled my foot off the accelerator, and we coasted on compression until the motor began to buck, and I kicked the clutch pedal down.

"This," she went on after a silence, and held the jade disk where I could see it, "is one of the most powerful protective charms. I've had it since I was a child, as many Chinese babies have. All I did was print the characters around the tire and pronounce the curse while the wheel rolled. If I did it right— Oh, look!"

Some one hundred yards ahead, in the middle of a bean field, was the ambulance. Stalled, with lights burning. The road made a sharp turn, but the ambulance hadn't. It had continued along an extension of this piece of road through a barbed-wire fence. I pulled off the macadam and cut the ignition.

I took the heavy flashlight from its steering-column frame. "We may need a club."

"Dr. Barq won't be a problem any longer, I think."

He wasn't. He wasn't even there. Oh, his clothes were: crumpled suit, socks in shoes—one on the accelerator, one on the floor under the clutch pedal. But not Dr. Barq.

I played the flash on the clothes. "How could he do that, I wonder? The shirt is still buttoned."

"He disintegrated, Al."

"Now that we got that settled, let's take our film and get out of here." I thought it over. She hadn't been kidding. "He . . . what?"

"By the golden navel of Confucius," she said softly, in awe, "how old must that . . . uh, man have been! How many souls must he have absorbed! Look, Al, there's no trace of his body, not even dust. It must have exploded into gas."

"I'm not very bright," I said. "Put it in single syllables."

"I told you before, Al. His soul long since died. But before his time was up, he had stolen a soul. Then another and another, for centuries maybe. He was simply glued together with somebody else' life, and when that was destroyed, his body disappeared. Go get the film from the truck, Al."

A chill ran down my spine. "Are you going to do it here? Here?"

"This is a good place, Al. And there's no traffic. Wassa malla you?" she demanded—with a slight quaver. "You catchee devil shakes. You aflaid?"

We used the ambulance headlights until we had all the film off the reels and piled in the bean patch. Then Lily set up her altar, signaled me to flick off the lights, and went through her ceremony. She tossed a lighted match on the film, and we ran like hell from the blinding hot flare that lit the countryside for a few seconds.

We got into the truck. I felt as if I'd just been told a shaggy dog story—a tremendous, exciting build-up, and no tag line. The sense of anticlimax left me limp, frustrated, and a little resentful.

"I wonder how we'll pay for the film," I grumbled.

We started back to my apartment.

A light, and the rattle of dishes from the kitchen located Pat and Norman. Pat at the stove, fiddling with the coffeepot, and Norman at the table with a heaping plate of eggs, bacon, and toast.

He got to his feet and shook hands with me and Lily. Even in the hospital gown, he had a lot of stuff. He radiated, like the old Norman. Not like the new Norman who, for sometime before his coma, had become aimless, forgetful, rude, and always late; who spent more money than was his habit; who was inconsiderate of his fellow actors.

"It's nice to see you, Al!" he said warmly. "And you, Miss Kung. How is your job?"

Lily's mouth hung open, too, like mine. Pat just watched. Nobody said anything. Norman frowned. Politely, but he frowned.

"Miss Ryan either won't or can't tell me what happened," he said. "Did I get drunk last night? Did you have to put me to bed? Honestly, I don't remember. Tell me, Al. If it's bad, I want to know."

Well, we told him. Nine weeks out of his life, soul caught on strips of celluloid, waiting to be released by the proper incantation, or waiting to be destroyed, lost. Dr. Barq, attempting to prevent the restoration of that soul, so that he might write the checks by virtue of a power of attorney granted by a ghoul-ridden, zombi judge.

It sounded silly. I couldn't blame Norman for smiling.

"It's exceedingly handsome of you to try to spare me," he said. "And your fairy tale is entertaining. But I'd like to know what I did. It must have been colossal. Will there be damage suits?"

"Honest, Norm, we're giving it to you on the level. Look. Here's today's paper. Look at the date."

He began to feel our seriousness. He began to believe that something had happened to him. But he wouldn't accept our interpretation.

We told him about destroying the film, about the "borrowing" of negatives, about Zach climbing out on a limb.

"If money will straighten it out, Al, we'll give Zach a check in the morning. Now. What's my next picture? Retakes on 'Hickory, Dickory, Death'?"

Pat caught her breath. "You're not . . . not going back into pictures?"

He stared at her. "But of course. What else do I know?"

"You can't, Norm," I said. "You simply can't. Look, you've got plenty of money. Retire. Buy some chickens. Grow up with the country. But stay away from cameras."

"Al, I feel that you really believe this fantastic story."

"Believe it? I know it, Norm."

He chuckled. "May I sleep here again tonight, Al?"

"Sure, Norm. But listen—"

"Tomorrow, Al. You'll feel different tomorrow."

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. I don't feel different. One thing, though, it'll take another forty years, I suppose, to exhaust his soul again. Norman is safe, I guess. And, as he said, all he knows is acting.

But what about the others? You can't tell 'em. You can only wait.

Another worry, and it isn't mine exclusively: in times like these, I wish they'd stop photographing the president so much.

THE END.

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GUARDIAN

By Michael Corbin

● The fellow with the unlighted cigarette—the dawdling pedestrian who makes you stop—or the farmhand by the roadside might be yours. But you'd never know, naturally.

Illustrated by M. Isip

INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

To—Secretary, Recording Office
From No.—1,234,567,890,123
Rank—Guardian Angel
Subject—Resignation
Remarks—See Below

I should have followed my hunch and gone into the Harp & Halo Corps when I re-enlisted this time. But some of the other Guardians said this was a fairly soft touch, this watching over a man till the Sands & Time department sends out his Day-is-done order.

Well, the job is about what I expected, and I handled my first assignment discreetly. Look at my card; you'll see.

So I can't see any reason for my suspension—"pending an investigation." And the semiofficial suggestion that I resign and be forgiven smells like office politics to me.

Every time you turn your back around here, you're likely to get a flaming sword between your shoulder blades.

I'm not going to resign, even if I get Hell for it. For I seem to detect the fine angelic hand of Mike in this affair. Mike isn't his real name, of course, which is secret. And I don't know his number, but you can look it up on my record sheet—he scouted that Sodom and Gomorrah job with me, and grandstanded a little too much, if you ask me.

I bawled him out for blinding those men so publicly, and that was the start of the break between us. Confidentially, I think he's turning the heat on me because of that and one other brush with me; he's only using the J. Bonnie Camber case as a peg to hang his accusations on.

There was no need for a trouble-shooter on that case. J. Bonnie was no more than five minutes late—look it up—but Mike came soaring in with lightning in both eyes to see what was holding up the parade.

Oh, I'm for efficiency; don't get me wrong. I know that Receiving is overloaded these days, and if they fall behind schedule there's Hell to pay. But we've built up a reserve, and a few small payments won't hurt us any. I claim a slight loss was justifiable where Bonnie Camber was concerned.

Anyway, speaking of efficiency, Mike himself hasn't such a hot score. Look up the record. You'll find that he was three weeks late in delivering a message to Daniel, and was suspended for dallying with the King of Persia. You'll also see that I was assigned to see the job through, and that I was right on the dot when it came to muzzling those big cats.

You can see that, since he already disliked me for the incident at Lot's, he would probably swear a private revenge because I finished what he messed up by playing around the Persian court. Now he's trying to get even. Well, I'm going to give him a run for his manna.

Anyway, I shouldn't have been assigned to J. Bonnie in the first place. A green relief Guardian has no business around a broken-down newspaperman. Especially when he's working on a political weekly on the brink of a local election.

Oh, I followed regulations. You'll see on my report that I turned into a cop and took him home when he got drunk and lost. And I gave him that puncture when he was driving Hell-bent down that black country road; I was the yokel who helped him change the tire and told him about the bridge that was out, fifty yards ahead.

But how could I know what to do about Ellen? We've got nothing like her around here. I had to do what I thought was best—no, I'll be honest. I had to do what I did, but I believe it was best. Five minutes aren't so important, when you've got all eternity to make 'em up.

Ellen. Yes, Ellen.

"Princess," Bonnie would say to her every morning. "I have brought you a token."

He'd take his jaunty hat off his gray head and sweep it low as he handed her a flower, or what-

ever. As well as she could at the switchboard, she'd curtsy.

It was a game, see? A game, but it meant a lot to both. They looked forward to it each morning. And all the other Guardians who happened to be in the lobby at the time would glow a little.

Not so the district supervisor for the Adversary. He made that building a sort of headquarters, and his road crew reported to him there. When Bonnie and Ellen put on their little act each morning, he'd sneer at them and at the tender smiles of humans and Guardians present.

I got tired of his attitude, and quick. I zipped over to his lair just above the building entrance on the sixth morning.

"Listen, Snake-puss," I said, "don't get any ideas about them, see?"

He looked me over as if I were a sour harp string.

"You're new here?"

"But mighty vigilant, and if you pull anything fancy, I'll smite you. Look it up in the Code. You'll find I have a right."

"I'm not planning anything . . . uh, fancy, as you say."

"No? Listen, I've seen your kind before. Always figuring, waiting for a chance to do evil. I'm warning you, lay off!"

He seemed cowed. "Yes, your brightness."

Now maybe I shot my mouth off too much, but I don't think so. You know how the Adversaries are about a relief Guardian; they try to snatch his ward away by any means. Maybe if I hadn't said

anything to the supervisor, the word to get Bonnie would have been delayed somewhat. But, as I say, I don't believe it.

Anyway, I felt able to handle the situation—nothing cocky in my attitude, you understand, nothing of the greenhorn throwing his wings around. I was confident, that's all, and I didn't give the supervisor another thought at the time. Bonnie had troubles enough to keep me fluttering.

He had photostatic proof that the incumbent district attorney, one Rob Hoke, had accepted a bribe to suppress embezzlement charges against a local broker, and that Hoke took a regular cut of the vice juice, which was split three ways between the district attorney, the chief of police and the mayor.

Bonnie had his colors on a young lawyer, opposing the incumbent D. A., and was intending to print his proof of Hoke's malfeasance in the final issue of his paper, two days before election. He had showed the stuff to the young lawyer's campaign manager, Harry Lane, who was also Ellen's fiancé, and they both felt that the publication would put the election on ice.

Harry had promoted funds to blanket the city with this issue of Bonnie's paper, and had contracted for distribution which would lay a copy on every doorstep in the county. Bonnie was to make a nice profit, and was happy about it until the first phone call came from Hoke's office, five days before election.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Rob," Bonnie said into his phone after the preliminaries were over. He listened, and his office staff—two reporters and an office girl—stopped work at the word "Rob."

"Wait a minute, you rancid tub of grease," Bonnie said quietly, after a few minutes, "of course I'm opposing you. My personal opinion is that you are a treacherous, lecherous, remorseless, kindless villain, and I'll print any facts about you I can get. Libel is my worry, not yours. But as for certain documents at which you so cautiously hint, I don't know anything about them."

He hung up, said to the office girl, "I won't be back today," and walked out. At the switchboard, he paused only long enough to ask Ellen to have dinner with him that evening if Harry Lane was busy enough to leave her stranded. She crinkled blue eyes at him, accepted, and he left the building.

As we passed through the entrance, I saw the supervisor of the Adversary working on a graph. I played a hunch and zoomed off to check. As I suspected, a runaway truck was scheduled to rip through the first intersection Bonnie was to cross, and the supervisor had been plotting collision courses so that the paths of the truck and Bonnie would meet.

My move was obvious, of course. I changed into a man with a cigarette in his mouth, waited at the corner for Bonnie, and asked him for a match. He paused, fumbled in his pocket for a second, and struck it for me.

The wind from the truck blew out the match as the big machine swooshed through the red light, and I knew that the set-up was made for Bonnie alone, for the truck touched nobody and the driver got it in hand immediately. A woman screamed, but nobody was hurt.

Well, it was all right with me that the Adversaries were gunning for my ward. I like situations that keep me up on my wing tips. All the other Guardians in the neighborhood began passing the word that a private war was on and to help me in every way.

Bonnie went to his ramshackle hotel, took the documents out of his ragged mattress, and had them put in the hotel safe. Then he telephoned the young lawyer who was the candidate for the office of district attorney.

After some chitchat, Bonnie asked: "Does anybody know about our deal who would sell you out? . . . Well, the D. A. has wind of the papers I hold, and he got the information somewhere. . . . Yes, he would definitely pay high for such knowledge. His office is a rich plum, a plum that's always ripe. Who knows about the papers aside from you and me? . . . I see. Well, Harry wouldn't sell out. . . . Yes, the papers are in a safe place. . . . Yes, I'll be careful."

As he hung up, a knock shook his door.

Two big men were there, dressed in plain business suits and dark hats. One of their Guardians told me that they were attached to the district attorney's office. Bonnie knew them, called the brown-eyed husky Al, and the slate-eyed, marble-faced hulk was called Jerry.

"What do you want?" Bonnie asked.

Al looked down at him. "A little talk, Bonnie, a little talk."

"I don't want you in here. You can't come in."

Al placed his large palm in Bonnie's face and walked inside, sort of trundling Bonnie ahead of him. "Lock the door, Jerry," Al said.

Bonnie moved from behind Al's hand, sat on the bed and watched Jerry pocket the key. "What does Hoke want from me, Al?"

"Some papers, Bonnie, a few papers."

"I haven't any papers."

Jerry broke in. "We're wastin' time. You can take off your cheaters, Bonnie."

"Wait, Jerry," Al said, "wait. Let's do this like gentlemen. Give us the papers, Bonnie, and you won't be hurt too much."

"I tell you, I don't know anything about any papers."

Al sighed. "Very well. Take off your glasses, Bonnie." Bonnie laid his spectacles on the dresser.

"Now the shirt, Bonnie," Al said.

When Bonnie had bared his thin torso, Jerry hit him under the heart with a small, leather sap filled with shot. Bonnie winced, gasped, but didn't cry out. Jerry hit him again, and Bonnie groaned.

"Muzzle him," Al directed, and Jerry put a strip of adhesive across Bonnie's mouth. "When you are ready to talk, Bonnie," Al continued, "nod your head. All right, Jerry, go on."

Jerry hit Bonnie again under the heart, then shifted his attack. He was slow and deliberate, never striking hard enough to crack a rib, and never fast enough to work up a sweat. He marked each of Bonnie's ribs with a dark bruise, pounded him over the kidneys, and used the heart blow repeatedly.

When Bonnie passed out the first time, Al brought a glass of water from the bathroom and tossed it in Bonnie's face. It revived Bonnie enough so that he rolled off the bed to the floor, where he passed out again, and Al drew another glass of water.

"Ready to tell us now, Bonnie, ready?"

Bonnie moved his head without opening his eyes. No.

Jerry went to work on him again, striking spots as yet uncolored by bruises. Bonnie lasted only a few strokes this time, and had to be revived again.

Twice more this was repeated, when Al said, "That's enough for today. We don't want to kill him."

I smiled to myself at this. I wouldn't have let them kill him; his order hadn't come out yet.

"We'll see you again tomorrow, Bonnie," Al said. "Don't try to leave town."

Bonnie lay still for a long time before he had strength enough to pull the tape off his mouth. Then he crawled into the bathroom, took off all his clothes but his shoes, which were beyond his strength, and struggled into the tub.

After he had soaked a couple of hours, he was shaky but able to stand. He got on some clothes, took a revolver from his bureau drawer. He shoved this down his belt, buttoned his coat over it, and went downstairs, one painful slow step at a time, his face as gray as his hair.

He got his papers from the hotel safe, his car from the garage, and started looking for Harry Lane. I scouted ahead, remembering the Adversaries were after him, and was able to avert one planned disaster by wandering in front of him as a pedestrian. He slowed to let me cross, and another car roared across the intersection just ahead of him.

I don't think this will be brought up against me on grounds that I was too zealous, but if it is, I'd like to point out that they were trying to kill him. I cited that business in the hotel room to show that I wasn't horning into something that was none of my affair. But the Adversaries' campaign was different; they wanted his blood. I didn't like to take a chance on a wreck that might only maim him but, on the other hand, might kill him before his order came out.

He didn't find Harry Lane, and in due time he picked up Ellen for their dinner date. He was himself again as soon as she was in the car—sardonic, overelaborately courteous. They had a couple of cocktails at a quiet bar before dinner in a restaurant all crystal and linen. Over coffee and port, Ellen sounded a new note in the conversation.

"Harry called me to find where you were, Bonnie. I told him to try your hotel. Did he reach you?"

Bonnie looked at her, his eyes thoughtful behind glasses as they touched on her smooth black hair, light eyes, blue dinner dress. "In a way, he did," Bonnie said, "though not in person. I've looked for him all afternoon. Do you know where he is?"

"That's what I want to tell you."

She stared at her hands while a waiter came and refilled their wine glasses.

"He was called out of town, Bonnie, until after election. On business. I asked him what about you, and the scheme you had together. He said he didn't think you would deliver, but if you did, you could handle it yourself. What does that mean?"

Bonnie's mouth had a bitter droop. "Gather ye plums while ye may. From the tone of your voice, Princess, I'd say you had something else to tell. Go on."

"Yes. He said that if he heard the right kind of news, he'd come into a comfortable sum and a good job. He asked me to set a date for the wedding. What shall I tell him, Bonnie?"

He blinked across the table at her. "Why ask me?"

She made an impatient motion with her head. "We don't have to waste words. I know how you feel about me, you know how I feel about you. What shall I tell him?"

"What do you want to tell him, Princess?"

"I don't know," Ellen said. "I always understood it was impossible to love two persons at once, but I've made a lie out of that. I can't have you both. I leave it to you."

"Child, I'm old enough to be your father."

She made another impatient movement with her smooth shoulders. "That has nothing to do with it."

"Ah, but it has. In fifteen years, you'll be at the top of your prime and I'll be an old man with a child bride. A disparity in age becomes more important as time lurches on."

"How do you know? You've never married."

"I observe the facts of life in others, Princess. What I should like to know is this. Exactly how do you feel about your Harry Lane?"

She thought about it for a while. "I'd say I'm *in* love with him. It's a kind of flame, different from the solid and comfortable love I feel for you."

"Then I advise you," Bonnie said, spacing his words, "to take the flame. By all means, take the flame. It will mean something, in later years, to have been shaken to the depths in your youth. I know." He paused, and a far look entered his eyes as he spoke in hushed tones. "Once I was a cub reporter on a New York daily, engaged to a girl, a girl something like you, Princess. She was forced to work. It was somewhat the same set-up that you and Harry have. One afternoon, a fire broke out in the shirt factory where she worked, on the fourth floor of a frame building. There was no outside fire escape on the building, and she, among others, flung herself from the window. Those girls were impaled on the iron pickets of a fence, four floors below."

Ellen caught her breath, clenched her hands.

"I had caught one of the fire engines," Bonnie went on, huskily, "and I was in the crowd that watched them jump, one by one, on to the palings. She had no idea I was there, I'm sure, or she would have waved before she jumped. She couldn't have heard my voice above the snap and crackle of burning walls, the clang of fire bells, and the roar of the crowd. The point I'm trying to make, Princess, is that she and I knew that flame. But . . . she . . . jumped. If I had it to do over again, I'd make the same decision Harry has made. I'd forget ideals, and loyalty. I'd concentrate on life, and love the woman of my choice."

"Bonnie, darling," Ellen whispered.

They were quiet as they finished their wine. Bonnie signaled the waiter for more coffee, and

after it was poured, Ellen broke the silence with a puzzled question.

"What decision? That Harry made, what was it?"

Bonnie smiled slowly. "He decided that the flame was the thing, Princess. He is right. Maybe I wouldn't have done it the way he did, but who knows? Maybe I would. For you, I think so. I think I'd do anything for you, Princess."

He took from his pocket the Manila envelope containing the photostatic proof of the district attorney's malfeasance and handed it to Ellen.

"If Harry calls you, and I suspect he will, tell him I gave you this, and that I said he could come back. Tell him my paper isn't coming out."

"But I don't understand, Bonnie. What does it mean?"

"Never mind, Princess. It isn't important. And you take my car. I won't need it any more tonight. I'll pick it up in the morning."

"What are you going to do, Bonnie?"

"I'm going to call on a friend, Princess. It's an anonymous call, and I'll rent a plainer car than mine for the purpose."

"You sound so funny. You're not in trouble, or going to get in trouble, are you?"

"No. Run along, and thank you for the very high compliment you paid me."

After Ellen had gone, Bonnie went first to a rent-a-car lot and picked out an inconspicuous gray coupé. He insisted on a light towing chain being put in the luggage compartment, "in case I break down," he told the attendant.

He stopped at a bar, had a couple of drinks and cashed a small check. Then he filled up the gas tank and barreled out to what I discovered soon was a little country cottage where Al, the D. A.'s muscle man, lived.

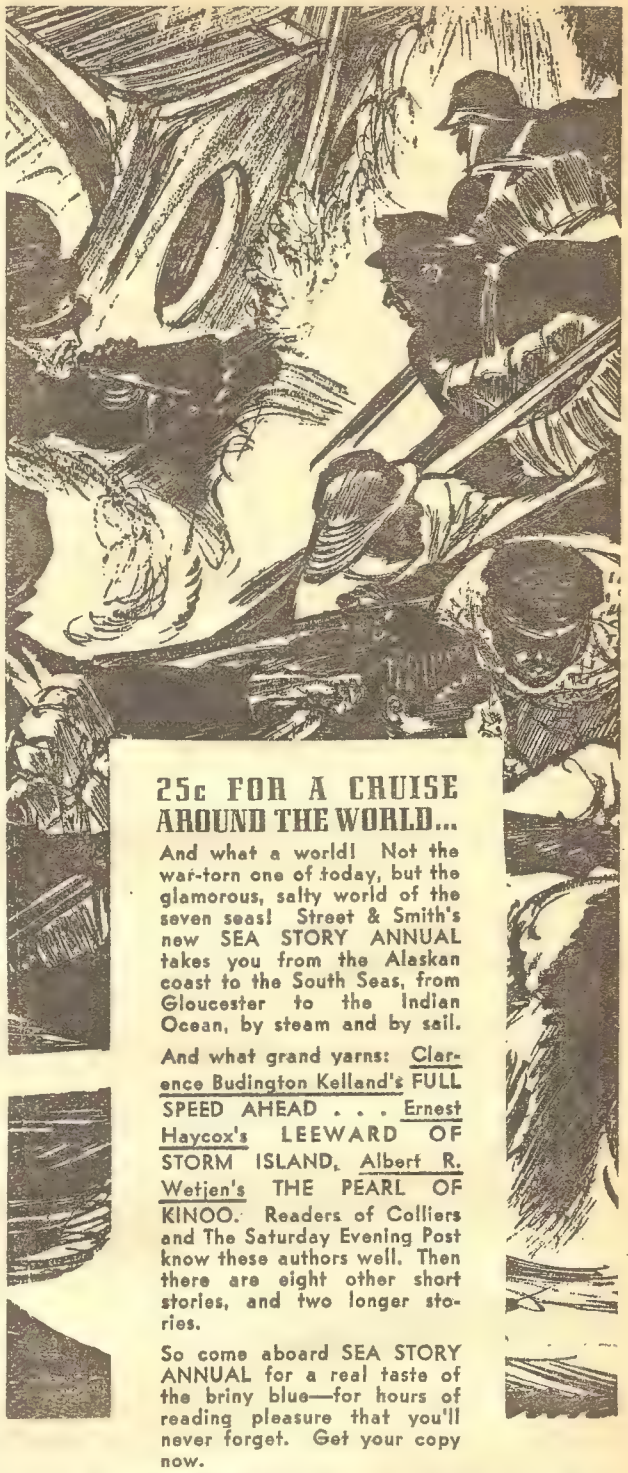
Bonnie took the chain, folded it over his left arm, and went to the door. Al answered his ring, and Bonnie slugged him unconscious with his gun when Al opened the door. The big man fell back into his hallway with a crash that shook the whole house, and Bonnie waited tensely for the noise to arouse anyone who might be inside.

There was no sign of other occupants, so Bonnie lashed Al's hands with his belt and tied the thug's shoestrings together. He waited for the big man to recover.

Presently Al opened his eyes, and Bonnie said, "Ah, good evening. There were two of you this afternoon, and I'd have been insane to resist. Now the odds are more even. I'm going to beat you nearly to death, Al, with this chain. You see, I don't care whether it leaves permanent marks or not."

Al stared at the chain. "Aw, Bonnie, man, you can't do that! You'll kill me!"

"Oh, no, Al. I'll be careful on that point."



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"But, Bonnie, listen! I had nothing against you personally. I was under orders. It wasn't my fault!"

"Yes, I know, Al. That's why I'm not going to kill you—quite. If I were you, I'd turn over. It'll be better to take this on your back. I'll try not to break your arms."

"Bonnie, I'll kill you for this."

"Yes, Al, I suppose so. But at least I'll get it out of my system."

"Bonnie, listen. Listen, Bonnie. We can make a deal. I'll—"

"Oh, shut up, Al," Bonnie said wearily. "I'd think no more of killing you than stamping on a spider. I'd think no more of dealing with you than with your boss, although maybe I did indirectly tonight. At any rate, you represent a certain type of scum that covers the surface of politics still in this country. Men elected to public office who become scavengers, feeding off the corruption of festering social sores. You, Al, are even worse than such men. You pander to them, you carry the spoils to them, you're a maggot stooge for a political vulture. Now turn over before I break your jaw with the end of this chain."

"Didn't you ever make a mistake, Bonnie?" Al asked.

"Yes. Many."

"Well, I made one once, see? And Hoke owns me, Bonnie. Owns me."

"Al, really I don't want to hit you in the face with this. Turn over."

"Bonnie, you'll cripple me for life!"

"Your body will match your mind, then."

"Bonnie, I'm going to be married. To a swell girl. Don't mark me up. I'm begging, Bonnie."

"You'll be a better man when I finish, Al. Better able to see somebody else' side of a question."

"After all, Bonnie, I never touched you today. It was Jerry beat you."

"Don't quibble, or I will kill you."

"You won't listen, Bonnie?"

"No."

"O. K., Bonnie. So help me, if it's the last thing I do, I'll get you for this. I'll kill you in little pieces, little strips—slow."

Al turned on his face, tensed himself, and Bonnie drew back his arm.

He held it. That bitter droop came back to his mouth.

"What good would it do?" he muttered. "What good would it do?"

He looped the chain over his arm again and went to the door. "You can get loose, Al, if you try hard enough."

"Bonnie, you're a white man," Al said, with a break in his voice. "Uh—God bless you, Bonnie!"

"A moot point," Bonnie said, and left.

As Bonnie hurled the rented car through the night, I swooped ahead to scout the road. That was when I found the bridge out, and I punctured his tire, then helped him change it, in the guise of a ranch hand, as I've said before. I told him about the bridge, directed him to a detour, and we buzzed into town without mishap.

He returned the car, took back his deposit, and retired to a bar. Here he settled down to some serious drinking.

This was not like other nights. He didn't look around for cronies, he didn't offer to buy drinks. He sat solitary in a corner, paid no heed to the juke box down whose throat tinkled a trickle of nickels. He ordered drinks four at a clip, and drank them grimly.

Once he raised his glass to a calendar on which was the word "Princess."

An occasional acquaintance or friend would stop at his table and speak, but Bonnie never looked once at any of them. He'd simply raise his hand to their greeting, keep his eyes on his glass. Mostly, he kept his glass empty.

One lean man with a Texas accent returned now and again. "Bonnie," he'd say. "Leave me buy yuh a drink, pal. It's right discouragin' to see yuh mopin' heah by yo' lonesome. Leave me buy yuh a drink, Bonnie."

"Go away, Tex," Bonnie would say, not looking up.

"Bettah give in, Bonnie. 'M gonna buy yuh a drink fo' the evenin's ovah."

"Go away, Tex. Tomorrow."

"Nope. Tonight, Bonnie. Sometime tonight."

Then Tex would serpentine back to the crowd at the bar, and Bonnie continued his solitary drinking. When he had had some fourteen drinks, he got glassily but steadily to his feet and went out.

"'M gonna buy yuh a drink, Bonnie," Tex shouted after him. "Tonight."

Bonnie stopped at a liquor store, bought two quarts of whiskey, and went to his hotel. He undressed partially, and began to do some real drinking.

After this had continued for some time, a Cherub came in with Bonnie's Day-is-done order from the Sands & Time Department. He gave it to me, and told me about situations here and there, and left.

I looked at the order. In an hour, Bonnie was to die. Traffic victim. There were no details, of course. I wondered just how he was going to die in traffic, when he had nearly enough liquor in him to kill him. If he drank much longer, it would surely kill him.

He continued to drink, and in about forty-five minutes I heard heavy and uncertain feet groping up the stairs. A voice started shouting, from the top of the stairway, "'M gonna buy yuh a drink, Bonnie!"

I zipped outside. It was Tex, and his Guardian told me the set-up. Tex was to persuade Bonnie to come out, and a car was to run him down.

Now I know that there's a Plan, that there's a reason for each death, but there was a point in this situation that I didn't like. I know I was wrong in not liking it. I know we are not to have any emotions. We are simply to carry out our job to the best of our ability.

But we are also to use our own judgment in emergencies. I'd used mine several times on this day, and had come out all right. Well, I used it again.

I changed to a cop again. "What do you want?" I asked Tex.

He goggled at me. "Want m' fr'en' Bonnie, officah."

"Go away," I said. "This is a stake-out. Beat it, or I'll run you in."

Tex's Guardian looked back at me in astonishment as Tex clumped downstairs. I turned into my normal self again, and watched Bonnie continue to guzzle the whiskey. His face was puffed and swollen, his torse was a mass of bruises. He was barely able to hold himself in a chair.

He poured a full water glass, halfway down the second quart, and tossed it off. He repeated this, and lost consciousness.

He was dying, but he took longer than I thought. His time arrived, was three minutes overtime, and he still breathed.

Mike entered at this point, and told me he was trouble-shooting. "Let me see his order," Mike said.

He looked it over. He looked at me.

"So you finally slipped up," he said. "I'll report this."

"Do," I said. "Anyway, he's gone."

Bonnie was dead.

"Five minutes late," Mike said. "For your sake, I hope you can explain it to the board."

Mike flipped off, and there was nothing more to keep me, but I stayed. The Cherub had told me Ellen was on her way.

I heard her feet rattle up the stairs and patter over to the door. She burst in, full of the phone call from Harry which the Cherub had told me about, the news that he had decided to stick with his candidate despite pressure and offers of security from the D. A.

"Bonnie, I—" She stopped, seeing his bruised body and swollen face. She knew he was dead. Nobody could mistake it. "Oh, Bonnie!" she said, dropping on her knees beside him. "Bonnie, darling!"

Well, I came away then, and here I am. In looking back over this, I see I was guilty of a technical breach. So I'll resign if that's the way you want it. I'll give this to a Cherub and he'll turn it in, as soon as I explain one more point.

I'm not squeamish. You know that. You'll remember how I took care of two squads of soldiers when King Ahaziah was putting the arm on Elijah. It wouldn't have bothered me if Bonnie had died under the wheels of a car. I know it doesn't matter which way they die, because of what happens next. But the Adversaries had no business butting in.

When the Cherub told me that they had arranged for Ellen to run over him with his own car, I just couldn't send him out there. I just couldn't.

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

EVER WONDER WHAT ALL A WOMAN CARRIED IN HER HANDBAG?

They carry such big ones—young suitcases. There are bottles and jars and bits of this and a little of that. Cosmetics and things, of course.

Or—are they all? Powders—just rouge, always? Bits of this and that and scraps of recipes. But maybe they aren't all recipes for making cake!

At least, that's Fritz Leiber, Jr.'s, suggestion in

CONJURE WIFE

In the APRIL UNKNOWN WORLDS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE HAT TRICK

By Felix Graham

● A short item dedicated to the proposition that human beings don't—and can't—believe things they don't want to understand.

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

In a sense, the thing never happened. Actually, it would not have happened had not a thundershower been at its height when the four of them came out of the movie.

It had been a horror picture. A really horrible one—not trapdoor claptrap, but a subtle, insidious thing that made the rain-laden night air seem clean and sweet and welcome. To three of them. The fourth—

They stood under the marquee, and Mae said, "Gee, gang, what do we do now, swim or take taxis?" Mae was a cute little blonde with a turned-up nose, the better for smelling the perfumes she sold across a department-store counter.

Elsie turned to the two boys and said, "Let's all go up to my studio for a while. It's early yet." The faint emphasis on the word "studio" was the snapper. Elsie had had the studio for only a week, and the novelty of living in a studio instead of a furnished room made her feel proud

and bohemian and a little wicked. She wouldn't, of course, have invited Walter up alone, but as long as there were two couples of them, it would be all right.

Bob said, "Swell. Listen, Wally, you hold this cab. I'll run down and get some wine. You girls like port?"

Walter and the girls took the cab while Bob talked the bartender, whom he knew slightly, into selling a fifth of wine after legal hours. He came running back with it and they were off to Elsie's.

Mae, in the cab, got to thinking about the horror picture again; she'd almost made them walk out on it. She shivered, and Bob put his arm around her protectively. "Forget it, Mae," he said. "Just a picture. Nothing like that ever happens, really."

"If it did—" Walter began, and then stopped abruptly.

Bob looked at him and said, "If it did, what?"

Walter's voice was a bit apologetic. "Forget now what I was going to say." He smiled, a little strangely, as though the picture had affected him a bit differently than it had affected the others. Quite a bit.

"How's school coming, Walter?" Elsie asked.

Walter was taking a pre-med course at night school; this was his one night off for the week. Days he worked in a bookstore on Chestnut Street. He nodded and said, "Pretty good."

Elsie was comparing him, mentally, with Mae's boy friend, Bob. Walter wasn't quite as tall as Bob, but he wasn't bad-looking in spite of his glasses. And he was sure a lot smarter than Bob was and would get further some day. Bob was learning printing and was halfway through his apprenticeship now. He'd quit high school in his third year.

When they got to Elsie's studio, she found four glasses in the cupboard, even if they were all different sizes and shapes, and then she rummaged around for crackers and peanut butter while Bob opened the wine and filled the glasses.

It was Elsie's first party in the studio, and it turned out not to be a very wicked one. They talked about the horror picture mostly, and Bob refilled their glasses a couple of times, but none of them felt it much.

Then the conversation ran down a bit and it was still early. Elsie said, "Bob, you used to do some good card tricks. I got a deck in the drawer there. Show us."

That's how it started, as simply as that. Bob took the deck and had Mae draw a card. Then he cut the deck and had Mae put it back in at the cut, and let her cut them a few times, and then he went through the deck, face up, and showed her the card, the nine of spades.

Walter watched without particular interest. He probably wouldn't have said anything if Elsie hadn't piped up, "Bob, that's wonderful. I don't see *how* you do it." So Walter told her, "It's easy; he looked at the bottom card before he started, and when he cut her card into the deck, that card would be on top of it, so he just picked out the card that was next to it."

Elsie saw the look Bob was giving Walter and she tried to cover up by saying how clever it was even when you knew how it worked, but Bob said, "Wally, maybe you can show us something good. Maybe you're Thurston's pet nephew or something."

Walter grinned at him. He said, "If I had a hat, I might show you one." It was safe; neither of the boys had worn hats. Mae pointed to the tricky little thing she'd taken off her head and put on Elsie's dresser. Walter scowled at it. "Call that a hat? Listen, Bob, I'm sorry I gave your trick away. Skip it; I'm no good at them."

Bob had been riffling the cards back and forth from one hand to the other, and he might have skipped it had not the deck slipped and scattered on the floor. He picked them up and his face was red, not entirely from bending over. He held out the deck to Walter. "You must be good on cards, too," he said. "If you could give my trick away, you must know some. G'wan, do one."

Walter took the deck a little reluctantly, and thought a minute. Then, with Elsie watching him eagerly, he picked out three cards, holding them so no one else could see them, and put the deck back down. Then he held up the three cards, in a V shape, and said, "I'll put one of these on top, one on bottom, and one in the middle of the deck and bring them together with a cut. Look, it's the two of diamonds, the ace of diamonds, and the three of diamonds."

He turned them around again so the backs of the cards were toward his audience and began to place them, one on top the deck, one in the middle, and—

"Aw, I get that one," Bob said. "That wasn't the ace of diamonds. It was the ace of hearts and you held it between the other two so just the point of the heart showed. You got that ace of diamonds already planted on top the deck." He grinned triumphantly.

Mae said, "Bob, that was *mean*. Wally anyway let you finish your stunt before he said anything."

Elsie frowned at Bob, too. Then her face suddenly lit up and she went across to the closet and opened the door and took a cardboard box off the top shelf. "Just remembered this," she said. "It's from a year ago when I had a part in a ballet at the social center. A top hat."

She opened the box and took it out. It was dented and, despite the box, a bit dusty, but it was indubitably a top hat. She put it, on its crown, on the table near Walter. "You said you could

do a *good* one with a hat, Walter," she said. "Show him."

Everybody was looking at Walter and he shifted uncomfortably. "I . . . I was just kidding him, Elsie. I don't . . . I mean it's been so long since I tried that kind of stuff when I was a kid, and everything. I don't remember it."

Bob grinned happily and stood up. His glass and Walter's were empty and he filled them, and he put a little more into the girls' glasses, although they weren't empty yet. Then he picked up a yardstick that was in the corner and flourished it like a circus barker's cane. He said, "Step this way, ladies and gentlemen, to see the one and only Walter Beekman do the famous nonexistent trick with the black top hat. And in the next cage we have—"

"Bob, shut up," said Mae.

There was a faint glitter in Walter's eyes. He said, "For two cents, I'd—"

Bob reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change. He took two pennies out and reached across and dropped them into the inverted top hat. He said, "There you are," and waved the yardstick-cane again. "Price only two cents, the one-fiftieth part of a dollah! Step right up and see the greatest prestidigitatah on earth—"

Walter drank his wine and then his face kept getting redder while Bob went on spieling. Then he stood up. He said quietly, "What'd you like to see for your two cents, Bob?"

Elsie looked at him open-eyed. "You mean, Wally, you're offering to take *anything* out of—"

"Maybe."

Bob exploded into raucous laughter. He said, "Rats," and reached for the wine bottle.

Walter said, "You asked for it."

He left the top hat right on the table, but he reached out a hand toward it, uncertainly at first. There was a squealing sound from inside the hat, and Walter plunged his hand down in quickly and brought it up holding something by the scruff of the neck.

Mae screamed and then put the back of her hand over her mouth and her eyes were like white saucers. Elsie keeled over quietly on the studio couch in a dead faint; and Bob stood there with his cane-yardstick in midair and his face frozen.

The thing squealed again as Walter lifted it a little higher out of the hat. It looked like a monstrous, hideous black rat. But it was bigger than a rat should be, too big even to have come out of the hat. Its eyes glowed like red light bulbs and it was champing horribly its long scimitar-shaped white teeth, clicking them together with its mouth going several inches open each time and closing like a trap. It wriggled to get the scruff of its neck free of Walter's trembling hand; its clawed forefeet flailed the air. It looked vicious beyond belief.

It squealed incessantly, frightfully, and it smelled with a rank fetid odor as though it had lived in graves and eaten of their contents.

Then, as suddenly as he had pulled his hand out of the hat, Walter pushed it down in again, and the thing down with it. The squealing stopped and Walter took his hand out of the hat. He stood there, shaking, his face pale. He got a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped sweat off his forehead. His voice sounded strange: "I should never have done it." He ran for the door, opened it, and they heard him stumbling down the stairs.

Mae's hand come away from her mouth slowly and she said, "T . . . take me home, Bob."

Bob passed a hand across his eyes and said, "Gosh, what—" and went across and looked into the hat. His two pennies were in there, but he didn't reach in to take them out.

He said, his voice cracking once, "What about Elsie? Should we—" Mae got up slowly and said, "Let her sleep it off." They didn't talk much on the way home.

It was two days later that Bob met Elsie on the street. He said, "Hi, Elsie."

And she said, "Hi, there." He said, "Gosh, that was some party we had at your studio the other night. We . . . we drank too much, I guess."

Something seemed to pass across Elsie's face for a moment, and then she smiled and said, "Well, *I* sure did; I passed out like a light."

Bob grinned back, and said, "I was a little high myself, I guess. Next time I'll have better manners."

Mae had her next date with Bob the following Monday. It wasn't a double date this time.

After the show, Bob said, "Shall we drop in somewhere for a drink?"

For some reason Mae shivered slightly. "Well, all right, but not wine. I'm off of wine. Say, have you seen Wally since last week?"

Bob shook his head. "Guess you're right about wine. Wally can't take it, either. Made him sick or something and he ran out quick, didn't he? Hope he made the street in time."

Mae dimpled at him. "You weren't so sober yourself, Mr. Evans. Didn't you try to pick a fight with him over some silly card tricks or something? Gee, that picture we saw was awful; I had a nightmare that night."

He smiled. "What about?"

"About a— Gee, I don't remember. Funny how real a dream can be, and still you can't remember just what it was."

Bob didn't see Walter Beekman until one day, three weeks after the party, he dropped into the bookstore. It was a dull hour and Walter, alone in the store, was writing at a desk in the rear. "Hi, Wally. What you doing?"

Walter got up and then nodded toward the papers he'd been working on. "Thesis. This is my last year pre-med, and I'm majoring in psychology."

Bob leaned negligently against the desk. "Psychology, huh?" he asked tolerantly. "What you writing about?"

Walter looked at him sharply before he answered. "Interesting theme. I'm trying to prove that the human mind is incapable of assimilating the utterly incredible. That, in other words, if you saw something you simply couldn't possibly believe, you'd talk yourself out of believing you saw it. You'd ratiocinate it, somehow."

"You mean if I saw a pink elephant I wouldn't believe it?"

Walter said, "Yes, that or a— Skip it." He went up front to wait on another customer.

When Walter came back, Bob said, "Got a good mystery in the rentals? I got the week end off; maybe I'll read one."

Walter ran his eye along the rental shelves and then flipped the cover of a book with his forefinger. "Here's a dilly of a weird," he said. "About beings from another—world, living here in disguise, pretending they're people."

"What for?"

Walter grinned at him. "Read it and find out. It might surprise you."

Bob moved restlessly and turned to look at the rental books himself. He said, "Aw, I'd rather have a plain mystery story. All that kind of stuff is too much hooey for me." For some reason he didn't quite understand, he looked up at Walter and said, "Isn't it?"

Walter nodded and said, "Yeah, I guess it is."

THE END.

Join the Bedplate AND WIN THE WORLD!

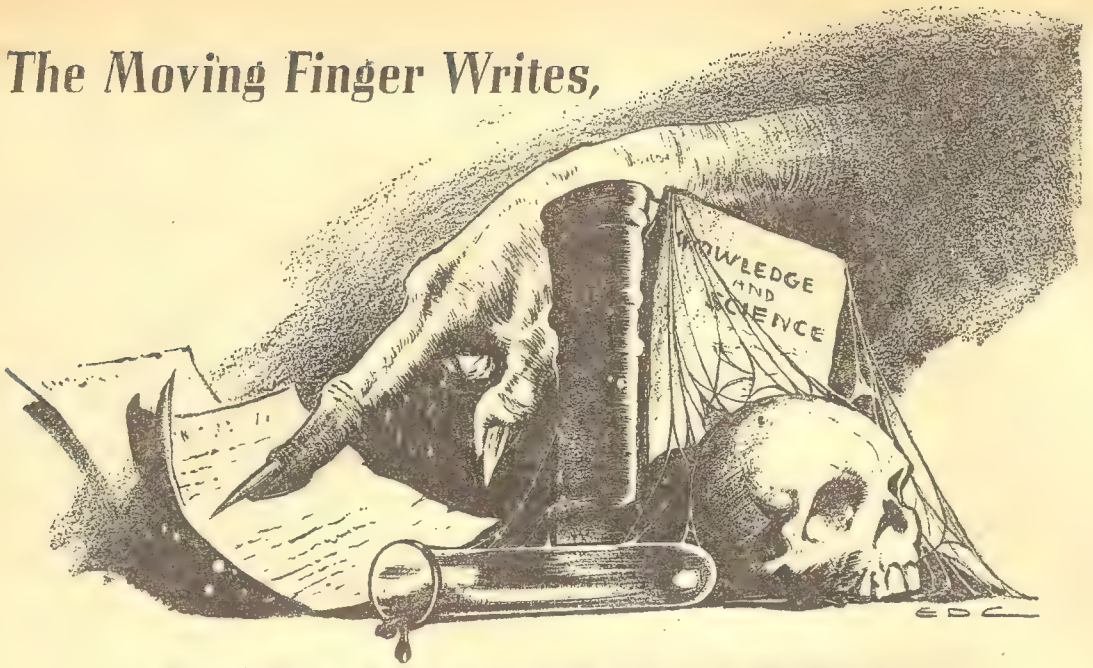
Well, it was something like that. The idea was, whoever could find out how the bedplate was locked—yet, not touching—would be master of the world. Because he would know how to mix terrene and contra-terrene matter!

In a weird, age-old deserted ship in space—half contra-terrene, half terrene matter—the Asterites of Earth were battling it to the death with German Martians for the secret.

Read OPPOSITES—REACT! by Will Stewart, in January

ASTOUNDING
SCIENCE-FICTION
AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

The Moving Finger Writes,



---AND HAVING WRIT---

Bok's just getting into the swing of authorship.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The December, 1942, Unknown Worlds—my first in some time—was a fascinating surprise with its novel by Hannes Bok. It has never occurred to me that he might write a story. I started "The Sorcerer's ship" expecting something really weird.

His style is not at all like his pictures, I think, but sounds quite down-to-earth. At first I thought his story was going to be too mundane, but it turned ou highly satisfactory. I was thoroughly absorbed. Characters, suspense, philosophy, humor, unexpectedness—all superb. I notice that his illustrations don't match the text very well, but probably that very carelessness is what makes it possible for him to get that madly alien result when he draws.

I don't know how often he has written before. To me he is new, and I am enthusiastic about the promise in his style and unfettered manner of thinking.

"The Elixir" is a little exaggerated in its mannerisms, but for the most part I go for it. "It Will Come to You" is a honey, with a darling ending.

"Transients Only" is a ghost story what *is* a ghost story—whether by a MacGregor or a Jameson. The ending was weak, but I don't care because I thoroughly enjoyed most of it.

Those are all Class A stories. The rest are Class B. Wish I'd liked them better.

"The Hag Seleen": Its comparatively happy ending didn't save it from being a gloomy and very unpleasant adventure. Not my type. I liked it least of all.

"The Wall": I like a story to leave some hints of other mysteries or future problems yet unsolved, but I don't want to be left entirely out of things. I hate to feel the patronizing smugness of the characters who understand all. This tale explains nothing. Here, ordinary mortals, are phenomena; make what you wish of them.

"The Golden Age": Interesting, but I heartily disapprove the assumption that maturation makes one what he is.

Most interesting illustrations were Bok's and Cartier's, but no complaints.—Harry E. Mongold, 1500 Silver Leaf Avenue, Burlington, Iowa.

We'll scare you again sometime—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I knew it would happen some day. "None But Lucifer" almost did it. "Darker Than You Think" came a little closer, and the only thing that prevented Sturgeon's grand novelette "It" from carrying away the honors was its brevity. But in all these tales, for one reason or another, there was just that additional *something* missing.

And then I read "Hell Is Forever." The issue was slow in coming to me through the myriad delays all too common these days, but still, to use the lingo of the publishing business, "cold," for I'd heard nothing of it beforehand.

But I didn't expect the soul-shattering quality of "Hell Is Forever." I didn't expect such an excellent, albeit unobtrusive, narrative hook, such skillful characterization, all-around superb writing, and, crowning delight of all—*such an ending!* The whole story demonstrated the deft utility of

words and thorough command of scene of a master. Particularly the section concerning Theone Dubedat's visitation to the alien sphere, which, though I wouldn't go so far as to claim it has never been done before, I've never seen and doubtless never will in future see it done as smoothly.

There's only one conclusion: "Hell Is Forever" is the best story Unknown has yet printed—head and shoulders over its rivals. A crowning achievement of the horror tale I only wish Lovecraft could have read.—John Hollis Mason, Apt. No. 86, Ernscliff Apts., Sherbourne & Wellesley, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

We wuz wrong—and she wuz robbed!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The last thing in my mind is to start a feud with Malcolm Jameson, but it goes against the grain to pick up the magazine containing my very first brainchild to see the light of print and find him hogging the spotlight on the cover and pretending it was his own.

Now don't misunderstand me. I admire his work extravagantly, and needless to say like him, too. Otherwise I wouldn't have lived with him all these years, raised his kids and kept his house and traipsed all over the seven seas trying to keep up with him, but it seems to me he has glory enough without cutting in on my poor maiden effort. Or was it your own fault? Did you think that "Mrs." on the return address was a misprint or something?

They say you can't unscramble eggs, so I don't know what you are going to do about it now that it has happened, but I know darn well I don't want my first and maybe only story to go down the chute as just another Jameson yarn. Outside of that, I think Unknown is a pretty good magazine. This story is more autobiographical than you think. The only place I could find to rent in Washington, when my husband went off to sea in the last war, was a haunted house in Georgetown. I don't recommend 'em except in emergencies.—Mary MacGregor (Jameson).

Cartier's in the army. And those way-back issues of Unknown may be found in secondhand magazine stores, or bought from dealers like Julius Unger, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Here we go again:

I have the current issue of Unknown Worlds sitting open beside me and shall launch into a discussion of it at once, thusly:

1. "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag" was, on the whole, very good. But—the story starts out with Hoag completely in the dark and ends up with him giving a lengthy explanation of all and sundry. How come, chum—mental telepathy?

2. "The Frog" was good. A little screwy, but that's the way I like 'em. Who's Miller? He's good, too.

3. "The Magician's Dinner" was humorous and neatly done. But I disagree with Miss Rice's flat statement that the reader is not happily married. She better break out that case of Scotch because my best friend has been happily married and is at this moment likewise. I ought to know. He's my dad —and another ardent fan of U. W.

4. Bok is swell! Where ya bin hidin' him?

5. "The New One" was well done, patriotic, and with a clever twist at the end.

6. "The Lie" was concise, brief and—*gulp*—to the point. You would do well to keep F. Brown and R. Louis on tap.

7. "The Goddess' Legacy" was, if you will pardon my expression, rotten. Jameson slipped terribly on that one. Better watch it.

Most abject apologies, kind sir. Glancing through some back issues of U. W. I discovered, much to my chagrin, that P. Schuyler Miller is an old hand at Unknown.

8. "Compliments of the Author" was, in my opinion the best. The plot was interesting and the ending was *quite* final.

Mentioning back issues, as I just was, I would like to submit my formula for preserving them:

First, I strengthen the covers by mounting them on cardboard on the inside. Next, I reinforce the back with two strips of transparent mending tape running the whole length of the back, half the strip on one side of the book and the other half on the back. This is repeated on the back cover. Finally, though this is just the final touch, I cover the whole thing, both sides and the back tightly with Cellophane. I hope that someone will be able to use this information to the best advantage.

Mr. Campbell, I have all of the issues dating from January, 1940, up to the present time, and I have just finished reading all the "—And Having Writ—" in my collection. The earlier ones contain enticing notices about stories I have missed, such as "None But Lucifer," "Slaves of Sleep," "Sinister Barrier" and others. These alluring names have had such an effect on me that I feel I MUST read them. So would it be possible for you to send me the name of anyone who would be willing to part with any back issues dating from March, 1939, to December, 1939?

Where is Cartier? I miss his drawings 'cause that was one of the main reasons I bought U. W. It's my guess he's in the service. Right?—Alan W. Furber, Jr., 25 Webster Road, East Milton, Massachusetts.

Continued on page 130

ON BOOKS OF MAGIC

WITCHCRAFT, by Charles Williams; London: Faber & Faber, Ltd.; 1941, 316 pp., 12s. 6d.

Materialistic readers who may be discouraged by the statement on the jacket of this book, that Mr. Williams is a profound student of theology and mysticism, will be pleasantly surprised to find that it is perhaps one of the most reasonable, readable, comprehensive and compact works on the subject of the development of the witch cult in Europe that has yet appeared.

In his preface the author gives credit—perhaps more generously than is necessary—to the works of that accomplished medieval maniac, Dr. Montague Summers; but then, every student of the subject sooner or later finds himself indebted to Father Summers' scholarship however he may abhor Father Summers' outlook. Mr. Williams' other main source is Dr. Henry Charles Lea's "Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft." This three-volume compilation of notes—invaluable for the serious student, but hardly light reading—was collected by the late Dr. Lea, the great historian of the Inquisition, and its methods, and was posthumously published a few years ago by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Mr. Williams says, "I am not myself convinced either by Dr. Summers' belief or by Dr. Lea's contempt." The best tribute to Mr. Williams' impartiality is that it is difficult to say, after reading "Witchcraft," just what his theological opinions are, so good a job does he do of letting the facts speak for themselves.

The author distinguishes early Christianity from its then competitors—Orphism, Mithraism, et cetera—by its severely monopolistic monotheism —derived from Judaeism—which led to its uncompromising hostility toward the many schools of occult and magical precept and practice that abounded throughout Imperial Roman Europe. The pseudo-sciences such as astrology and other forms of divination were old; so was the conjuration of petty spirits, good, bad, or indifferent, to work weal or woe. So were the dark rites of the Elder Gods, including practices such as child sacrifices which were once respectable but were now regarded as criminal. So were the ubiquitous village sorcerers with their charm and philters; their poisons natural and poisons magical. (We know now that the former worked and the latter did not, but they made no such clear distinction.) What was new, to Europe that is, was the division of all uncomprehended phenomena into God's Righteous Miracles and the Devil's Loathsome Magic.

The pagan emperors kept their own tame soothsayers and magicians, but persecuted other occult practitioners with the same sporadic harshness they employed on the contumacious Christians. They feared that the magicians might be hired to hex them, or that occult inquiry into the term of their *imperia* and the identities of their successors would lead to disaffection. Lucius Apuleius' novel, "The Golden Ass" anticipates many of the props of modern fantasies, notably the patent self-strangling rope that has appeared in several stories in Unknown Worlds.

The magnification of the importance of the Devil was an early feature of Patristic thought; probably it resulted from and early contamination of Christianity with the ancient dualism of Iran. By the time of Augustine it was being carried to grotesque extremes. But there were two schools of thought: one held that the effects of sorcery—in the narrow sense of dealings with evil spirits—while truly diabolical in origin, were illusory and not objective. The other school held that the effects were objectively real; that the devils or Devil did transform or transport people.

The former opinion became embedded in canon law during the Dark Ages—the record of which in matters of witchcraft was actually very bright compared to what followed. Gratian's Canon, which became church law in 1234, firmly condemned belief in night riding. Some churchmen combated sorcery, some combated the belief in sorcery, and some, with marvelous inconsistency, fought valiantly against both at once. "They—the medieval theologians—made haste to enlarge the Devil's power, even while they denied that the Devil had power. They denied that Antichrist could conquer and burnt Catherine Delort for saying so." During the "glorious" thirteenth century the latter opinion came to prevail; Gratian's Canon was gotten around by saying that the science of witchcraft had advanced since the days when the canon was first written. The angelic Thomas Aquinas, who would not personally have hurt a fly, prepared the way for the witchcraft mania by deducing, with his invincible scholastic logic, that *disbelief* in witchcraft was a heresy. And heresy had been, of course, the most heinous of crimes ever since Chirstianity had gotten its European monopoly.

Witchcraft, which till then had been merely an ordinary crime like murder or adultery, expiable by fine and penance, came by 1400 to be regarded as a kind of heresy. Even so, the mania did not become serious for another century. Contrary to ill-informed opinion, there were almost no prosecutions of men of science, or even of men of pseudo-science, before 1400.

But there were a few sensational trials in the fourteenth; notably that of Gilles de Rais, who seems to have gotten no more than he deserved. The apparently true story of his crimes and perversions, together with the trumped-up charges

of elaborate blasphemy and pointless obscenity on which the Templars were destroyed in 1312-1315, furnished a model for the accusations of the later witch hunters. They may also have furnished a model for some would-be witches. With the clergy declaiming on the power of the Devil and the pleasures to be had by compacting with him, and giving minute details on how to go about it, it would be surprising if nobody tried it.

There were also, no doubt, surreptitious survivals of the worship of the Elder Gods, to whose ranks had now been added the pantheon of Hellenic paganism. Since the Elder Gods were commonly regarded as demons, their worship was *a priori* deemed to contain depraved and disgusting practices. So it may have; but monopolistic religions are prone to calumniate the fossil remnants of their predecessors. How much of the dark realm of Satanism and Goëtia (black magic) —really quite different things, but commonly confounded by both adherents and antagonists—were derived from which source, or for that matter how much real existence it had at all, cannot now be determined.

But at least we can be sure it was nothing like as common as the witch hunters thought. The witchcraft mania can be dated from the publication of the "Malleus Malleficarum" by the Inquisitors Krämer and Sprenger about 1490, to the public recantation and apology of the Salem jury in 1693. This is almost exactly two centuries, of which the second suffered much the more acutely from the mania.

Williams goes over the arguments—perfectly logical granted the Inquisitors' premises—of the "Malleus," with care. The huge work contains the most detailed prescriptions for the conduct of Inquisitorial courts, and would serve as a useful handbook for Heinrich Himmler. The basic theory was that witchcraft was so common and deadly that it were better to burn a score of innocents rather than let one witch go. Hence in practice accused persons were regarded as guilty until proven innocent, and the procedure was so rigged they seldom were proven innocent.

When a prisoner was considered "manifestly guilty"—i. e. when he had been forcibly and plausibly accused by anybody who disliked him or coveted his property—the judge was empowered to declare him a witch and hand him over to the secular arm. But first "common justice" required that he be made to confess. So he was tortured until he did. But he had to repeat his confession in open court, "voluntarily." If he recanted his confession, he was tortured as a backslider. The Inquisitors were instructed on how to trick the defendant, how to ask leading questions, how to seem to promise release in return for confession, and then burn him anyway, et cetera. Anything the defendant said would be held against him, and if he refused to talk at all that would be held against him, too.

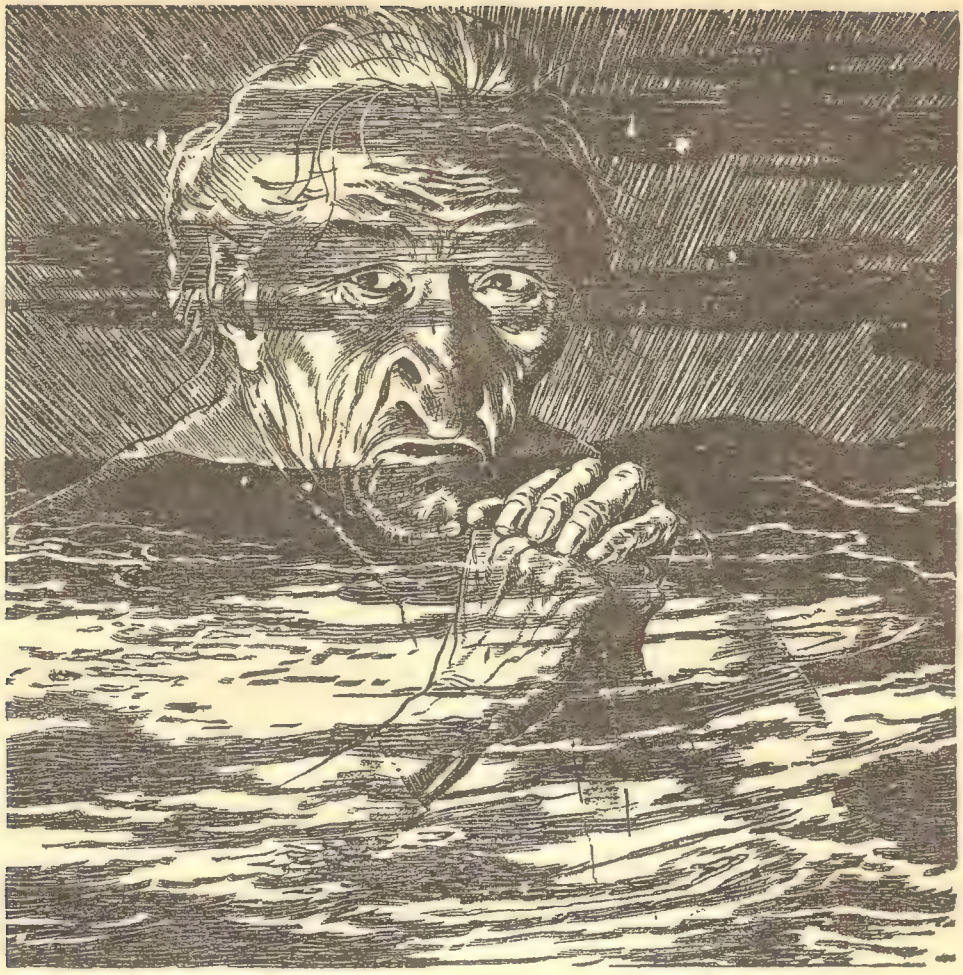
It is all quite properly blood-chilling. The thing that ranks Father Summers, for all his erudition, with the flat-earth fanatics and the people who think there is a Plot to rule the world by the Jews and/or the Masons, is that he agrees thoroughly with the point of view of Sprenger and Krämer and their equally fanatical and credulous successors such as Bodin and Rémy. Your reviewer would regard the performance of a Black Mass as a piece of rather silly hokum, protected by the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, and unlikely to produce any real results either here or hereafter. Father Summers apparently thinks a Black Mass the vilest of crimes, likely actually to raise the Devil, and properly punishable by burning at the stake. And if you burn a few innocents in smoking out the guilty, that's all right, too; they have their reward in Heaven.

It's unfortunate that the eminent Summers was not alive in the seventeenth century, during which the number of executions for witchcraft ran—probably—into six figures. Mr. Williams tells the whole tale, including the belated flare-up in Salem, Massachusetts. There grew up a class of professional witch finders who traveled about practicing in the best Zulu tradition.

Germany suffered the most from the mania. The countries with the best records were England, where torture was never legal—though sometimes applied extralegally, as it still is in the U. S. A.—and—of all places—Spain. James I of England, who despite his own belief in the existence of witches and his many unpleasant characteristics was a man of some intelligence, insisted that his judges exercise extreme care in weighing evidence in witchcraft cases. The Spanish Inquisition, despite the ferocity with which it pursued heretics, Jews and Moors, took a similar attitude. Both found that when extreme care was exercised, the "evidence" tended to evaporate into the thin air of rumor and old-wives'-tales.

Mr. Williams also goes a little into the story of Goëtia's would-be respectable counterpart, Theurgy or white magic, with information on the famous but gullible John Dee, George Sabellicus —the original Faust—and others. My only criticisms of the work are as follows: the case of Urban Grandier is mentioned under the assumption that Grandier was patently guilty, as De Rais and La Voisin undoubtedly were; more detailed accounts make Grandier the victim of a deliberate frame-up by Cardinal Richelieu. And more attention might have been paid to the features of Goëtia of pre-Christian origin. Otherwise the book is, as I have said, about the best work of its particular kind that I have seen.

J. Wellington Wells.



THE WITCH

By A. E. van Vogt

● She was old, old and afraid of the Sea and the Night. For the ancient witch-thing she was had reason to fear those things that the young people could not understand. They were wrong in that—and in not fearing her.

Illustrated by Orban

From where he sat, half hidden by the scraggly line of bushes, Marson watched the old woman. It was minutes now since he had stopped reading. The afternoon air hung breathless around him. Even here, a cliff's depth away from the sparkling tongue of sea that curled among the rocks below, the heat was a material thing, crushing at his strength.

But it was the letter in his pocket, not the blazing sunlight, that weighed on Marson's mind. Two days now since that startling letter had arrived; and he still hadn't the beginning of the courage necessary to ask for an explanation.

Frowning uncertainly—unsuspected — unsuspecting — he watched.

The old woman basked in the sun. Her long, thin, pale head drooped in sleep. On and on she sat, moveless, an almost shapeless form in her black sack of a dress.

The strain of looking hurt his

eyes; his gaze wandered; embraced the long, low, tree-protected cottage with its neat, white garage and its aloneness there on that high, green hill overlooking the great spread of city. Marson had a brief, cozy sense of privacy—then he turned back to the old woman.

For a long moment, he stared unshaken at the spot where she had been. He was conscious of a dim, intellectual surprise, but there was not a real thought in his head. After a brief period, he grew aware of the blank, and he thought:

Thirty feet to the front door from where she had been sitting; and she would have had to cross his line of vision to get there.

An old woman, perhaps ninety, perhaps a hundred or more, an incredibly old woman, capable of moving—well thirty feet a minute.

Marson stood up. There was a searing pain where an edge of the sun had cut into his shoulders. But that passed. From his upright position, he saw that not a solitary figure was visible on the steeply mounting sidewalk. And only the sound of the sea on the rocks below broke the silence of that hot Saturday afternoon.

Where had the old wretch disappeared to?

The front door opened; and Joanna came out. She called to him:

"Oh, there you are, Craig. Mother Quigley was just asking where you were."

Marson came silently down from the cliff's edge. Almost meticulously, he took his wife's words, figuratively rolled them over in his mind, and found them utterly inadequate. The old woman couldn't have been *just* asking for him, because the old woman had NOT gone through that door and therefore hadn't asked anyone anything for the last twenty minutes.

At last an idea came. He said: "Where's Mother Quigley now?"

"Inside." He saw that Joanna was intent on the flower box of the window beside the door. "She's been knitting in the living room for the last half hour."

Amazement in him yielded to sharp annoyance. There was too damn much old woman in his mind since that letter had come less than forty-eight hours before. He drew it out, and stared bleakly at the scrawl of his name on the envelope.

It was simple enough, really, that this incredible letter had come to him. After the old woman's arrival nearly a year before, an unexpected nightmare, he had mentally explored all the possible reverberations that might accrue from her presence in his home. And the thought had come that, if she had left any debts in the small village where she had lived, he'd better pay them.

A young man, whose appointment to the technical school principalship had been severely criticized on the grounds of his youth, couldn't afford to have *anything* come back on him. And so a month before he had leisurely written the letter to which this was the answer.

Slowly, he drew the note from its envelope and once more reread the mind-staggering words in it:

Dear Mr. Marson:

As I am the only debtor, the postmaster handed me your letter; and I wish to state that, when your great grandmother died last year, I buried her myself and in my capacity as gravestone maker, I carved a stone for her grave. I did this at my own expense, being a God-fearing man, but if there is a relative, I feel you should bear cost of same, which is eighteen (18) dollars. I hope to hear from you, as I need the money just now.

Pete Cole.

Marson stood for a long moment; then he turned to speak to Joanna—just in time to see her disappearing into the house. Once more undecided, he climbed to the cliff's edge, thinking:

The old scoundrel! The nerve of a perfect stranger of an old woman walking into a private home and pulling a deception like that.

His public situation being what it was, his only solution was to pay her way into an institution; and even that would require careful thought—

Frowning blackly, he hunched himself deeper into his chair there on the cliff's edge, and deliberately buried himself in his book. It was not until much later that memory came of the way the old woman had disappeared from the lawn. Funny, he thought then, it really was damned funny.

The memory faded—

Blankly sat the old woman.

Supper was over; and, because for years there had been no reserves of strength in that ancient body, digestion was an almost incredible process, an all-out affair.

She sat as one dead, without visible body movement, without thought in her brain; even the grim creature purpose that had brought her here to this house lay like a stone at the bottom of the black pool that was her mind.

It was as if she had always sat there in that chair by the window overlooking the sea, like an inanimate object, like some horrible mummy, like a wheel that, having settled into position, seemed now immovable.

After an hour, awareness began to creep into her bones. The creature mind of her, the strange, inhuman creature mind behind the parchmentlike, sharp-nosed mask of human flesh, stirred into life.

It studied Marson at the living room table, his head bent thoughtfully over the next term curriculum he was preparing. Toothless lips curled finally into a contemptuous sneer.

The sneer faded, as Joanna slipped softly into the room. Half-closed, letching eyes peered then, with an abruptly ravenous, beastlike lust at the slim, lithe, strong body. Pretty, pretty body,

soon now to be taken over.

In the three-day period of the first new moon after the summer solstice . . . in nine days exactly—

Nine days! The ancient carcass shuddered and wriggled ecstatically with the glee of the creature. Nine short days, and once again the age-long cycle of dynamic existence would begin. Such a pretty young body, too, capable of vibrant, world-ranging life—

Thought faded, as Joanna went back into the kitchen. Slowly, for the first time, awareness came of the sea.

Contentedly sat the old woman. Soon now, the sea would hold no terrors, and the blinds wouldn't have to be down, nor the windows shut; she would even be able to walk along the shore at midnight as of old; and *they*, whom she had deserted so long ago, would once more shrink from the irresistible energy aura of her new, young body.

The sound of the sea came to her, where she sat so quietly; calm sound at first, almost gentle in the soft sibilation of each wave thrust. Farther out, the voices of the water were louder, more raucous, blatantly confident, but the meaning of what they said was blurred by the distance, a dim, clamorous confusion that rustled discordantly out of the gathering night.

Night!

She shouldn't be aware of night falling, when the blinds were drawn.

With a little gasp, she twisted toward the window beside which she sat. Instantly, a blare of hideous fear exploded from her lips.

The ugly sound bellowed into Marson's ears, and brought him lurching to his feet. It raged through the door into the kitchen, and Joanna came running as if it was a rope pulling at her.

The old woman screeched on; and it was Marson who finally penetrated to the desire behind that mad terror.

"Good Lord!" he shrugged. "It's the windows and the blinds. I forgot to put them down when dusk fell."

He stopped, irritated, then: "Damned nonsense! I've a good mind to—"

"For Heaven's sake!" his wife urged. "We've got to stop that noise. I'll take this side of the room; you take the windows next to her."

Marson shrugged again, acquiescently. But he was thinking: They wouldn't have this to put up with much longer. As soon as the summer holidays arrived, he'd make arrangements to put her in the Old Folks Home. And that would be that. Less than two weeks now.

His wife's voice broke almost sharply across the silence that came, as Mother Quigley settled back into her chair: "I'm surprised at you forgetting a thing like that. You're usually so thoughtful."

"It was so damned hot!" Marson complained.

Joanna said no more; and he went back to his chair. But he was thinking suddenly: Old woman who fears the sea and the night, why did you come to this house by the sea, where the street lamps are far apart and the nights are almost primevally dark?

The gray thought passed; his mind returned with conscientious intentness to the preparation of the curriculum.

Startled sat the old woman!

All the swift rage of the creature burned within her. That wretched man, daring to forget. And yet—*"You're usually so thoughtful!"* his wife had said.

It was true. Not once in eleven months had he forgotten to look after the blinds—until today.

Was it possible that he suspected? That somehow, now that the time for the change was so near, an inkling of her purpose had dripped from her straining brain?

It had happened before. In the past, she had had to fight for her bodies against terrible, hostile men who had nothing but dreadful suspicion.

Jet-black eyes narrowed to pin points. With this man, there would have to be more than suspicion. Being what he was, practical, skeptical, cold-brained, not all the telepathic vibrations, nor the queer mind storms with their abnormal implications—if he had yet had any—would touch him or remain with him of themselves. Nothing but facts would rouse this man.

What facts? Was it possible that, in her intense concentrations of thought, she had unwittingly permitted images to show? Or had he made inquiries?

Her body shook, and then slowly purpose formed: She must take no chances.

Tomorrow was Sunday, and the man would be home. So nothing was possible. But Monday—

That was it. Monday morning while Joanna slept—and Joanna always went back to bed for an hour's nap after her husband had gone to work—on Monday morning she would slip in and prepare the sleeping body so that, seven days later, entry would be easy.

No more wasting time trying to persuade Joanna to take the stuff voluntarily. The silly fool with her refusal of home remedies, her prating of taking only doctors' prescriptions.

Forcible feeding would be risky—but not half so risky as expecting this wretched, doting wreck of a body to survive another year.

Implacable sat the old woman.

In spite of herself, she felt the toll of the hours of anticipation. At Monday breakfast, she drooled with the inner excitement of her purpose. The cereal fell from her misshaped mouth, milk and saliva splattered over the tablecloth—and she couldn't

help it. Old hands shook, mouth quivered; in everything her being yielded to that dreadful anility of body. Better get to her room before—

With a terrible start, she saw that the man was pushing clear of the table, and there was such a white look on his face that she scarcely needed his words, as he said:

"There's something I've been intending to say to Mother Quigley"—his voice took on a rasping note—"and right now, when I'm feeling thoroughly disgusted, is a darned good time to say it."

"For Heaven's sake, Craig"—Joanna cut in, sharply; and the old woman snatched at the interruption, and began queasily to get to her feet—"what's made you so irritable these last few days? Now, be a good lover and go to school. Personally, I'm not going to clean up this mess till I've had my nap, and I'm certainly not going to let it get me down. 'By."

A kiss; and she was gone into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Almost instantly, she vanished into the master bedroom; and then, even as the old woman struggled desperately to get farther out of her chair, Marson was turning to her, eyes bleak and determined.

Cornered, she stared up at him like a trapped animal, dismayed by the way this devilish body had betrayed her in an emergency, distorted her will. Marson said:

"Mother Quigley—I shall continue to call you that yet for the moment— I have received a letter from a man who claims to have carved a stone for the body he himself buried in your grave. What I would like to know is this: Who is occupying that grave? I—"

It was his own phrasing that brought Marson to startled silence. He stood strangely taut, struck rigid by a curious, alien horror, unlike anything he had ever known. For a long, terrible moment, his mind seemed to lie naked and exposed to the blast of an icy inner wind that whirled at him out of some nether darkness.

Thoughts came, a blare of obscene mental vaporings, unwholesome, black with ancient, incredibly ancient evil, a very seething mass of unsuspected horrors.

With a start he came out of that grisly world of his own imagination, and grew aware that the old crone was pouring forth harsh, almost eager words:

"It wasn't me that was buried. There were two of us old ones in the village; and when she died, I made her face to look like mine, and mine to look like hers, and I took her money and . . . I used to be an actress, you know, and I could use make-up. That's how it was, yes, yes, make-up; that's the whole explanation, and I'm not what you think at all, but just an old woman who was poor. That's all, just an old woman to be pitied—"

She would have gone on endlessly if the creature-logic in her had not, with dreadful effort, forced her quiet. She stood, then, breathing heavily, conscious that her voice had been too swift, too excited, her tongue loose with the looseness of old age, and her words had damned her at every syllable.

It was the man who brought surcease to her desperate fear; the man saying explosively:

"Good heavens, woman, do you mean to stand there and tell me you did a thing like that—"

Marson stopped, overwhelmed. Every word the old woman had spoken had drawn him further back from the strange, unsettling morass of thoughts that had briefly flooded his mind, back into the practical world of his own reason—and his own ethics. He felt almost physically shocked, and it was only after a long moment that he was able to go on. He said finally, slowly:

"You actually confess to the ghoulish deed of disfiguring a dead body for the purpose of stealing its money. Why, that's—"

His voice collapsed before that abyss of unsuspected moral degradation. Here was a crime of the baser sort, an unclean, revolting thing that, if it was ever found out, would draw the censure of an entire nation, and ruin any school principal alive.

He shuddered; he said hastily: "I haven't the time to go into this now but—"

With a start, he saw that she was heading toward the hallway that led to her bedroom. More firmly, he called: "And there's another thing. Saturday afternoon, you were sitting out on the lawn—"

A door closed softly. Behind it, the old woman stood, gasping from her exertions, but with a growing conviction of triumph. The silly stupid man still didn't suspect. What did she care what he thought of her. Only seven days remained; and if she could last them, nothing else mattered.

The danger was that her position would become more difficult every day. That meant—when the time came, a quick entry would be absolutely necessary. That meant—the woman's body must be prepared *now!*

Joanna, healthy Joanna, would already be asleep. So it was only a matter of waiting for that miserable husband to get out. She waited—

The sweet sound came at last from the near distance—the front door opening and then shutting. Like a stag at bay, the old woman quivered; her very bones shook with the sudden, sickish thrill of imminent action. If she failed, if she was discovered—

Some preparation she had made to offset such a disaster but—

The spasm of fear passed. With a final, reassuring fumble into the flat, black bosom of her dress, where the little bag of

powder hung open, she glided forth.

For the tiniest instant, she paused in the open doorway of Joanna's bedroom. Her gimlet eyes dwelt with a glitter of satisfaction on the sleeping figure. And then—

Then she was into the room.

The morning wind from the sea struck Marson like a blow, as he opened the door. He shut it with a swift burst of strength, and stood in the dully lighted hallway, indecisive.

It wasn't that he wasn't going out—there were too many things to do before the end of the school year; it was just that the abrupt resistance of the wind had crystallized a thought:

Ought he to go out without telling Joanna about the letter from the gravestone maker?

After all, the old woman now knew that he knew. In her cunning eagerness to defend herself and the security she must consider threatened, she might mention the subject to Joanna—and Joanna would know nothing.

Still undecided, Marson took several slow steps, then paused again just inside the living room. Damn it, the thing could probably wait till noon, especially as Joanna would be asleep by now. Even as it was, he'd have to go by car or streetcar if he hoped to reach the school at his usual early hour.

His thought twisted crazily, as the black form of the old woman glided ghostlike across the bedroom hallway straight into Joanna's room.

Senselessly, a yell quivered on Marson's lips—senselessly, because there was in him no reasoned realization of alienness. The sound froze unuttered because abruptly that icy, unnatural wind out of blackness was blowing again in his mind. Abnormal, primordial things echoed and raged—

He had no consciousness of running, but, suddenly, there was the open bedroom door, and there was the old woman—and at that last instant, though he had come with noiseless speed, the creature woman sensed him.

She jumped with a sheer physical dismay that was horrible to see. Her fingers that had been hovering over Joanna's mouth jerked spasmodically, and a greenish powder in them sprayed partly on the bed, mostly on the little rug beside the bed.

And then, Marson was on top of her. That loathsome mind-wind was blowing stronger, colder; and in him was an utter, deadly conviction that demonic muscles would resist his strength to the limit. For a moment, that certainly prevailed even over reality.

For there was nothing.

Thin, bony arms yielded instantly to his devastatingly hard thrust; a body that was like old, rotten paper crumbled to the floor from his murderous rush.

For the barest moment, the incredibly easy victory gave Marson pause. But no astonishment could genuinely restrain the violence of his purpose or cancel that unnatural sense of unhuman things; no totality of doubt at this instant could begin to counterbalance his fury at what he had seen.

The old woman lay at his feet in a shapeless, curled-up blob. With a pitiless ferocity, a savage intent beyond any emotion he had ever known, Marson snatched her from the floor.

Light as long-decayed wood, she came up in his fingers, a dangling, inhuman, black-clothed thing. He shook it, as he would have shaken a monster; and it was then, when his destroying purpose was a very blaze of unreasoning intensity that the incredible thing happened.

Images of the old woman flooded the room. Seven old women, all in a row, complete in every detail, from black, sack-like dress to semi-bald head, raced for the door. Three exact duplicates of the old woman were clawing frantically at the nearest window. The eleventh replica was on her knees desperately trying to squeeze under the bed.

With an astounded gasp, brain whirling madly, Marson dropped the thing in his hands. It fell squalling, and abruptly the eleven images of the old woman vanished like figments out of a nightmare.

"Craig!"

In a dim way, he recognized Joanna's voice. But still he stood, like a log of wood, unheeding. He was thinking piercingly: That was what had happened Saturday on the lawn—an image of the old woman unwittingly projected by her furiously working mind, as she sat in the living room knitting.

Unwitting images had they been now, of a certainty. The old woman's desperately fearful mind seeking ways of escape.

God, what was he thinking? There was—there *could* be nothing here but his own disordered imagination.

The thing was impossible.

"Craig, what is all this anyway? What's happened?"

He scarcely heard; for suddenly, quite clearly, almost calmly, his mind was co-ordinating around a single thought, simple, basic and terrible:

What did a man do with a witch in A. D. 1942?

The hard thought collapsed as he saw, for the first time, that Joanna was half-sitting, half-kneeling in the taut position she had jerked herself into when she wakened. She was swaying the slightest bit, as if her muscle control was incomplete. Her face was creased with the shock of her rude awakening.

Her eyes, he saw, were wide and almost blank; and they were staring at the old woman. With one swift glance, he followed that rigid gaze—and alarm struck through him.

Joanna had not wakened till the old woman screamed. She *hadn't* seen the images at all.

She would have only the picture of a powerful, brutal young man standing menacingly over the moaning form of an old woman—and by Heaven he'd have to act fast.

"Look!" Marson began curtly. "I caught her putting a green powder on your lips and—"

It was putting the thing in words that struck him dumb. His mind reeled before the tremendous fact that a witch had tried to feed dope to Joanna—*his* Joanna! In some incomprehensible way, Joanna was to be a victim—and he must convince her now of the action they must take.

Before that purpose, rage fled. Hastily, he sank down on the bed beside Joanna. Swiftly, he launched into his story. He made no mention of the images or of his own monstrous suspicions. Joanna was even more practical than he. It would only confuse the issue to let her get the impression that he was mad. He finished finally:

"I don't want any arguments. The facts speak for themselves. The powder alone damns her; the letter serves to throw enough doubt on her identity to relieve us of any further sense of obligation.

"Here's what we're going to do. First, I shall phone my secretary that I may not be in till late. Then I'll ring up the Old Folks Home. I have no doubt under normal conditions there are preliminaries to entry, but money ought to eliminate all red tape. We're getting rid of her today and—"

Amazingly, Joanna's laughter interrupted him, a wave of laughter that ended in a sharp, unnormal, hysterical note. Marson shook her.

"Darling," he began anxiously.

She pushed him away, scrambled off the bed, and knelt with a curious excitement beside the old woman.

"Mother Quigley," she started, and her voice was so high-pitched that Marson half-climbed to his feet. He sank down again, as she went on: "Mother Quigley, answer one question: That powder you were placing in my mouth—was it that ground seaweed remedy of yours that you've been trying to feed me for my headaches?"

The flare of hope that came to the old woman nearly wrecked her brain. How could she have forgotten her long efforts to make Joanna take the powder voluntarily? She whispered:

"Help me to my bed, dearie. I don't think anything is broken, but I'll have to lie down . . . yes, yes, my dear, that was the powder. I was so sure it would help you. We women, you know, with our headaches, have to stick together. I shouldn't have done it of course but—"

A thought, a blaze of anxiety, struck her. She whimpered: "You won't let him send me away, will you? I know I've been a lot of trouble and—"

She stopped, because there was a queer look on Joanna's face; and enough was enough. Victory could be overplayed. She listened with ill-suppressed content as Joanna said swiftly:

"Craig, hadn't you better go? You'll be late."

Marson said sharply: "I want the rest of that weed powder. I'm going to have that stuff analyzed."

But he evaded his wife's gaze; and he was thinking, stunned: "I'm crazy. I was so dizzy with rage that I had a nightmare of hallucinations."

Wasn't it Dr. Lycoming who had said that the human mind must have racial memory that extended back to the nameless seas that spawned man's ancestors? And that under proper and violent stress, these memories of terror would return?

His shame grew, as the old woman's shaking fingers produced a little canvas bag. Without a word, he took the container, and left the room.

Minutes later, with the soft pur of his car throbbing in his ears, eyes intent on the traffic, the whole affair seemed as remote and unreal as any dream.

He thought: "Well, what next? I still don't want her around but—"

It struck him with a curious, sharp dismay that there was not a plan in his head.

Tuesday—the old woman wakened with a start, and lay very still. Hunger came, but her mind was made up. She would not dress or eat till after the man was gone to work, and she would not come out at noon, or after school hours, but would remain in this room, with the door shut whenever he was around.

Six days before she could act, six days of dragging minutes, of doubts and fears.

Wednesday at 4:30 p. m., Marson's fingers relaxed on the shining knob of the front door, as the laughter of women tinkled from inside; and memory came that he had been warned of an impending tea.

Like an unwelcome intruder, he slipped off down the street, and it was seven o'clock before he emerged from the "talkie" and headed silently homewards.

He was thinking for the hundredth time: "I saw those old woman images. I know I saw them. It's my civilized instinct that makes me want to doubt, and so keeps me inactive."

The evening paper was lying on the doorstep. He picked it up; and later, after a supper of left-over sandwiches and hot coffee, at least two hours later, a paragraph from a war editorial caught first his eyes, and then his mind.

The enemy has not really fooled us. We know that all his acts, directly or indirectly, have been anti-*us*. The incredible and fantastic thing is this knowing all we know and doing nothing.

If an individual had as much suspicion, as much evidence, that someone was going to murder him at the first opportunity, he would try to prevent the act from being committed; he would not wait for the full, bloody consummation.

The greater fact is that there will come a time when everything possible is too little, even all-out effort too late.

With a start, Marson allowed the paper to fall. The war angle was already out of his mind. Twice he had voted "no opinion" on public-opinion war polls, and that had been strictly true. A young man in the first throes of the responsibility of running a great school had no time for war or politics. Later perhaps—

But the theme, the inmost meaning of that editorial, was for him, for his problem. *Knowing what he knew and doing nothing.*

Uneasily, but with sudden determination, he climbed to his feet. "Joanna," he began—and realized he was talking to an empty room.

He peered into the bedroom. Joanna lay on the bed, fully dressed, sound asleep. Marson's grimness faded into an understanding smile. Preparing that afternoon tea had taken its toll.

After an hour, she was still asleep, and so very quietly, very gently, he undressed her and put her to bed. She did not waken even when he kissed her good night.

Thursday: By noon, his mind was involved with a petty-larceny case, a sordid, miserable affair of a pretty girl caught stealing. He saw Kemp, the chemistry assistant, come in; and then withdraw quietly.

In abrupt fever of excitement, he postponed the unwelcome case, and hastened after Kemp. He found the man putting on his hat to go to lunch.

The young chemistry instructor's eyes lighted as they saw Marson, then he frowned.

"That green powder you gave me to analyze, Mr. Marson, it's been a tough assignment. I like to be thorough, you know."

Marson nodded. He knew the mettle of this man, which was why he had chosen him rather than his equally obliging chief. Kemp was young, eager; and he knew his subject.

"Go on," said Marson.

"As you suggested," Kemp continued, "it was ground weed. I took it up to Biology Bill . . . pardon me, I mean Mr. Grainger."

In spite of himself, Marson smiled. There was a time when he had said "Biology Bill" as a matter of course.

"Go on," was all he said now.

"Grainger identified it as a species of seaweed, known as *Hydrodendon Barelia*."

"Any special effects if taken into the human system?" Marson was all casualness.

"No-o! It's not dangerous, if that's what you mean. Naturally, I tried it on the dog, meaning myself, and it's rather unpleasant, not exactly bitter but sharp."

Marson was silent. He wondered whether he ought to feel disappointed or relieved. Or what? Kemp was speaking again:

"I looked up its history, and, surprisingly, it has quite a history. You know how in Europe they make you study a lot of stuff about the old alchemists and all that kind of stuff, to give you an historical grounding."

"Yes?"

Kemp laughed. "You haven't got a witch around your place by any chance?"

"Eh!" The exclamation almost burned Marson's lips. He fought hard to hide the tremendousness of that shock.

Kemp laughed again. "According to '*Die Geschichte der Zauberinnen*' by the Austrian, Karl Gloeck, *Hydrodendon Barelia* is the modern name for the sinister witch's weed of antiquity. I'm not talking about the special witches of our Christian lore, with their childish attributes, but the old tribe of devil's creatures that came out of prehistory, regular full-blooded sea witches. It seems when each successive body gets old, they choose a young woman's body, attune themselves to it by living with the victim, and take possession any time after midnight of the first full moon period following the 21st of June. Witch's weed is supposed to make the entry easier. Gloeck says . . . why, what's the matter, sir?"

His impulse, his wild and terrible impulse, was to babble the whole story to Kemp. With a gigantic effort, he stopped himself; for Kemp, though he might talk easily of witches, was a scientist to the depths of his soul.

And what he—Marson—might have to do, must not be endangered by the knowledge that some practical, doubting person—anyone—suspected the truth. The mere existence of suspicion would corrode his will, and, in the final issue, undermine his decision to act.

He heard himself muttering words of thanks; minutes later, on his way, he was thinking miserably: What could he say, how could he convince Joanna that the old woman must be gotten rid off?

And there was one more thing that he *had* to clear up before he would dare risk everything in the only, unilateral action that remained. One more thing—

All Saturday morning, the sun shone brilliantly, but by afternoon black clouds rode above his racing car. At six in the evening it rained bitterly for ten minutes; and then, slowly, the sky cleared.

His first view of the village was from a hill, and that, he thought, relieved, should make it easier. From a group of trees, he surveyed the little sprawl of houses and buildings. It was the church that confused him at first.

He kept searching in its vicinity with his field glasses. And it was nearly half an hour before he was convinced that what he sought was not there. Twilight was thick over the world now, and that brought surging panic. He couldn't possibly dare to go down to the village, and inquire where the graveyard was. Yet—hurry, hurry!

Genuinely unsettled physically, he walked deeper into the woods along the edge of the hill. There was a jutting point of ground farther along, from where he would be able to sweep the countryside. These villages sometimes had their graveyards a considerable distance away and—

The little roadway burst upon him abruptly, as he emerged from the brush; and there a few scant feet away was a trellised gate. Beyond it, in the gathering shadows, simple crosses gleamed; an angel stood whitely, stiffly, poised for flight; and several great, shining granite stones

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reared rigidly from a dark, quiet earth.

Night lay black and still on the graveyard when his cautiously used flashlight at last picked out the headstone he craved. The inscription was simple:

Mrs. Quigley
Died July 7, 1941
Over 90 years old

He went back to the car, and got the shovel; and then he began to dig. The earth was strong; and he was not accustomed to digging. After an hour, he had penetrated about a foot and a half.

Breathless, he sank down on the ground, and for a while he lay there under the night sky with its shifting panoply of clouds. A queer, intellectual remembrance came that the average weight of university presidents and high school principals was around one hundred eighty pounds, according to Young.

But the devil of it was, he thought grimly, it was all weight and no endurance. Nevertheless, he had to go on, if it took all night.

At least, he was sure of one thing—Joanna wasn't home. It had been a tough job persuading her to accept that week-end invitation alone, tougher still to lie about the duties that would take him out of the city until Sunday morning; and he had had to promise faithfully that he would drive out Sunday to get her.

The simplest thing of all had been getting the young girl to look after the old woman over the week end and—

The sound of a car passing brought him to his feet in one jerky movement. He frowned. It wasn't that he was worried, or even basically alarmed. His mind felt rock-steady; his determination was an unshaken thing. Here in this dark, peaceful setting, disturbance was as unlikely as his own ghoullike incursion. People simply didn't come to graveyards at night.

The night sped, as he dug on and on, deeper, nearer to that secret he must have before he could take the deadly action that logic dictated even now. And he didn't feel like a ghoul—

There was no feeling at all, only his purpose, his grim unalterable purpose; and there was the dark night, and the quietness, broken only by the swish of dirt flung upward and outward. His life, his strength flowed on here in this little, tree-grown field of death; and his watch showed twenty-five minutes to two when at last the spade struck wood.

It was after two when his flashlight peered eerily into the empty wooden box.

For long seconds, he stared; and now that the reality was here, he didn't know what he had expected. Obviously, only too obviously, an image had been buried here—and vanished gleefully as the dirt began to thud in the filling of the grave.

But why a burial at all? Who was she trying to fool? What?

His mind grew taut. Reasons didn't matter now. He *knew;* that was what counted. And his actions must be as cold and deadly, as was the purpose of the creature that had fastened itself on his household.

His car glided onto the deserted early morning highway. The gray dawn came out of the east to meet him, as he drove; and only his dark purpose, firmer, icier each minute, an intellectualized thing as unquenchable as sun fire, kept him companion.

It was deep into the afternoon when his machine, in its iron-throated second gear, whirred up the steep hill, and twisted into the runway that led to the garage.

He went into the house, and for a while he sat down. The girl whom Joanna had left in charge was a pretty, red-haired thing named Helen. She was quite fragilely built, he noted with grim approval; he had suggested her for the week end with that very smallness in mind. And yes, she wouldn't mind staying another night, if they didn't come home. And when was he leaving to get his wife?

"Oh, I'm going to have a nap first," Marson replied. "Had rather a hard drive. And you . . . what are you going to do while I sleep?"

"I've found some magazines," the girl said. "I'm going to sit here and read. I'll keep very quiet, I assure you."

"Thank you," Marson said. "It's just for a couple of hours, you know."

He smiled bleakly to himself, as he went into the bedroom, and closed the door. Men with desperate plans had to be bold, had to rely on the simplest, most straightforward realities of life—such as the fact that people normally stayed away from cemeteries at night. And that young women didn't make a nuisance of themselves by prowling around when they had promised not to.

He took off his shoes, put on his slippers, and then—

Five long minutes he waited to give her time to settle down. Finally, softly, he went through the bathroom door that led to the hallway that connected the kitchen and the bedrooms. The kitchen door creaked as he went out, but he allowed himself no qualms; not a trace of fear entered into the ice-cold region that was his brain.

Why should a girl, comfortably seated, reading an absorbing story, tied by a promise to be silent—why should such a girl investigate an ordinary sound? Even new houses were notoriously full of special noises.

The car was parked at the side of the house, where there was only one window. He took the five gallon tin of gasoline out of the back seat, carried it through the kitchen, down into the basement. He covered it swiftly with

some old cloth, then he was up again, through the kitchen—

He reached the bedroom, thinking tensely: It was these details that must paralyze most people planning murder. Tonight when he came back, he wouldn't be able to drive the car up the hill, because it was to be a very special, unseen, ghostly trip. The car would be parked at least a mile away; and, obviously, it would be fantastically risky, and tiring, to lug a five gallon tin of gas a whole mile through back alleys.

And what a nightmare it would be to blunder with such a tin through the kitchen and into the basement at midnight. Impossible too, he had found, to get it past Joanna without her seeing.

Murder had its difficulties; and quite simply of course, murder it must be. And by fire. All that he ever remembered about witches showed the overwhelming importance of fire. And just let lightly built Helen try to break down the old woman's door after the fire had started and he had locked that door from the outside—

He lay for a while quietly on the bed; and the thought came that no man would seem a greater scoundrel than he if all that he had done and all that he intended was ever found out.

For a moment, then, a fear came black as pitch; and as if the picture was there before his eyes, he saw the great school slipping from him, the greater college beyond fading like the dream it was, fading into the mists that surrounded a prison cell.

He thought: It would be so easy to take half measures that would rid him and Joanna of the terrible problem. All he needed to do next day was to take her to the Old Folks Home, while Joanna was still away—and ruthlessly face down all subsequent objections.

She would escape perhaps, but never back to them.

He could retreat, then, into his world of school and Joanna; existence would flow on in its immense American way—and somewhere soon there would be a young woman witch, glowing with the strength of ancient, evil life renewed; and somewhere too there would be a human soul shattered out of its lawful body, a home where an old woman had blatantly, skillfully, intruded.

Knowing what he did, and doing nothing short of—everything!

He must have slept on that thought, the demanding sleep of utterly weary nerves, unaccustomed to being denied their rest. He wakened with a shock. It was pitch dark, he saw, and—

The bedroom door opened softly. Joanna came tiptoeing in. She saw him by the light that streamed from the hall. She stopped and smiled. Then she came over and kissed him.

"Darling," she said, "I'm so glad you hadn't started out to get me. A delightful couple offered to drive me home, and I thought, if we met you on the way, at least it would have saved you that much anyway, after your long, tiring week end. I've sent Helen home; it's after eleven, so just undress and go straight to bed. I'm going to have a cup of tea myself; perhaps you'd like one too."

Her voice barely penetrated through the great sounds that clanged in his brain, the pure agony of realization.

After eleven—less than an hour to the midnight that, once a year, began the fatal period of the witch's moon. The whole world of his plans was crashing about his ears.

He hovered about her, while she put the kettle on. It was half past eleven when they finished the tea; and still he couldn't speak, couldn't begin to find the beginning that would cover all the things that had to

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be said. Wretchedly, he grew aware of her eyes watching him, as she puffed at her cigarette.

He got up, and started to pace the floor; and now there was dark puzzlement in her fine brown eyes. Twice, she started to speak, but each time cut herself off.

And waited. He could almost feel her waiting in that quiet, earnest way of hers, waiting for him to speak first.

The impossibility, he thought then, the utter impossibility of convincing this calm, practical, tender-hearted wife of his. And yet, it *had* to be done, now before it was too late, before even all-out effort would be too little.

The recurrence of that phrase from the editorial started a streak of cold perspiration down his face. He stopped short, stopped in front of her; and his eyes must have been glaring pools, his rigid posture terrifying; for she shrank the faintest bit.

"Craig—"

"Joanna, I want you to take your hat and coat and go to a hotel."

It needed no imagination to realize that his words must sound insane. He plunged on with the volubility of a child telling an exciting story. And that was the way he felt—like a child talking to a tolerant grown-up. But he couldn't stop. He omitted only his grim murder purpose. She would have to absorb the shock of that later when it was all over. When he had finished, he saw that her gaze was tender.

"You poor darling," she said, "so that's what's been bothering you. You were worried about me. I can just see how everything would work on your mind. I'd have felt the same, if it was you apparently in danger."

Marson groaned. So that was the angle she was taking—sweet understanding; humoring his natural alarm; believing not a word. He caught his mind into a measure of calm; he said in a queer, shaky voice:

"Joanna, think of Kemp's definite analysis of it as witch's weed, and the fact the body is not in the grave—"

Still there was no fire in her eyes, no flame of basic fear. She was frowning; she said:

"But why would she have to go to all that trouble of burying one of her images, when all she had to do was get on the train and come here? Physically, that is what she did; why that enormous farce of a burial?"

Marson flared: "Why the lie she told me about having put make-up on someone else, who was buried there? Oh, darling, don't you see—"

Slowly, reasonably, Joanna spoke again: "There may have been some connivance, Craig, perhaps between the man, Pete Cole, who wrote you the letter, and Mother Quigley. Have you thought of that?"

If she had been with him, he thought, when he opened that dark grave. If she had seen the incredible image— If, if, if—

He stole a glance at the clock on the wall. It was seventeen minutes to twelve, and that nearly twisted his brain. He shuddered—and fought for control of his voice. There were arguments he could think of, but the time for talk was past—far past. Only one thing mattered.

"Joanna," he said, and his voice was so intense that it shocked him, "you'll go to the hotel for three days, for my sake?"

"Why, of course, darling." She looked serene, as she stood up. "My night bag is still packed. I'll just take the car and—"

A thought seemed to strike her. Her fine, clear brow creased. "What about you?"

"I'll stay here of course," he said, "to see that she stays here. You can phone me up at the school tomorrow. Hurry, for Heaven's sake."

He felt chilled by the way her gaze was appraising him. "Just a minute," she said, and her voice was slow, taut. "Originally, you planned to have me out of the way only till tomorrow. What —are you—planning to do—tonight?"

His mind was abruptly sullen, rebellious; his mouth awkward, as if only the truth could come easily from it. Lies had always been hard for him. But he tried now, pitifully:

"All I wanted was to get you out of the way, while I visited the grave. I didn't really figure beyond that."

Her eyes didn't believe him; her voice said so, but just what words she used somehow didn't penetrate; for an odd steadiness was coming to him, realization that the time must be only minutes away, and that all this talk was worthless. Only his relentless purpose mattered. He said simply, almost as if he were talking to himself:

"I intended to lock her door from the outside, and burn the house, but I can see now that isn't necessary. You'd better get going, darling, because this is going to be messy; and you mustn't see it. You see, I'm going to take her out to the cliff's edge, and throw her to the night sea she fears so violently."

He stopped because the clock, incredibly, said eight minutes to twelve. Without a sound, without waiting for the words that seemed to quiver on her lips, he whirled and raced into the bedroom corridor. He tried the old woman's door. It was locked. A very fury of frustration caught at his throat.

"Open up!" he roared.

There was silence within; he felt Joanna's fingers tugging futilely at his sleeve. And then he was flinging the full weight of his one hundred eighty pounds at that door. Two bone-wrenching thrusts—and it went down with an ear-splitting crash.

His fingers fumbled for the light switch. There was a click, and then—

He stopped, chilled, half paralyzed by what the light revealed: Twelve old women, twelve creatures snarling at him from every part of the room.

The witch was out in the open —and ready.

The queerest thing of all in that tremendous moment was the sheer, genuine glow of triumph that swept him—the triumph of a man who has indisputably won an argument with his wife. He felt a crazy, incredible joy; he wanted to shout: "See! see! wasn't I right? Wasn't it exactly as I told you?"

With an effort, he caught his whirling mind; and the shaky realization came that actually he was on the verge of madness. He said unsteadily:

"This is going to take a little time. I'll have to carry them one by one to the cliff; and the law of averages says that I'll strike the right one sooner or later. We won't have to worry about her slipping away in between, because we know her horrible fear of the night. It's only a matter of perseverance—"

His voice faltered the faintest bit; for suddenly the ghastly reality of what was here struck his inner consciousness. Some of the creatures sat on the bed, some on the floor; two stood, their arms around each other; and half of them were gibbering now in a fantastic caricature of terror. With a start, he grew aware of Joanna behind him.

She was pale, incredibly pale, for Joanna; and her voice, when she spoke, quavered; she said:

"The trouble with you, Craig, is that you're not practical. You want to do physical things like throwing her onto the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, or burning her. It proves that even yet your basic intellect doesn't believe in her. Or you'd know what to do."

She had been pressing against him, staring wide-eyed over his shoulder at that whimpering, terrified crew. Now, before he could realize her intention, she slipped under his arm, and was into the room.

Her shoulder bumped him slightly as she passed, and threw him off balance. It was only for a moment, but when he could look again, eight squalling crones had Joanna surrounded.

He had a brief glimpse of her distorted face. Six gnarled hands were clawing to open her mouth; a tangle of desperate old women's hands were clutching at her arms and her legs, trying to hold her flailing, furious body.

And they were succeeding! That was the terrifying reality that drove him into the midst of that brew of old women with battering fists—and pulled Joanna clear.

Immense anger grew out of his fear. "You silly fool!" he raged. "Don't you realize it must be after midnight?"

Then, with an abrupt, fuller realization that she had actually been attacked, piercingly:

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." Shakily. "Yes."

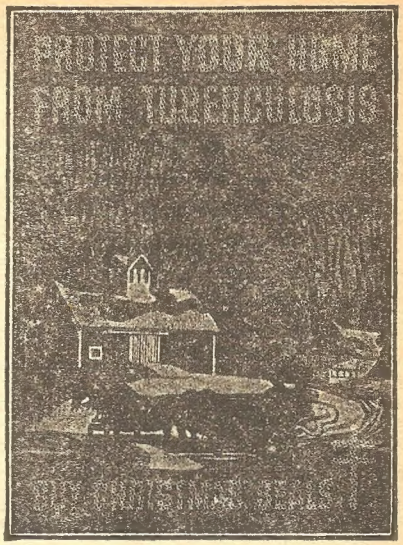
But *she* would have said that too. He glared at her with mad eyes, as if by the sheer intensity of his gaze, he would see through her face into her brain. She must have seen his terrible thought in his straining countenance, for she cried:

"Don't you see, darling? The blinds, the windows—pull them up. That's what I intended to do. Let in the night; let in the things she fears. If she exists, then so must they. Don't you see?"

He took Joanna with him, kicking at the creatures with his fists and his feet, with a grim, merciless ferocity. He tore the blind from its hooks; one thrust of his foot smashed the whole lower pane of the window. And then, back at the door, they waited.

Waited!

There was a whisper of water splattering on the window sill. A shape without shape silhouetted abnormally against the blue-



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black sky beyond the window. And then, the water was on the floor, trickling from a misty shape that seemed to walk. A voice sighed, or was it a thought:

"You nearly fooled us, Niyasha, with that false burial. We lost sight of you for months. But we knew that only by the sea and from the sea could your old body draw the strength for the change. We watched, as we have so long for so many of the traitors; and so at last you answer the justice of the ancient waters."

There was no sound but the sibilation of water trickling. The old women were silent as stones; and they sat like birds fascinated by snakes. And suddenly, the images were gone, snuffed out. One fragile, lonely-looking old woman sat on the floor directly in the path of the mist-thing. Almost primly, she gathered her skirts about her.

The mist enveloped her form. She was lifted into it, then instantly dropped. Swiftly, the mist retreated to the window. It was gone. The old woman lay flat on her back, eyes open and staring; her mouth open, too, unprettily.

That was the over-all effect—the utter lack of anything beautiful.

THE END.

—AND HAVING WRIT—

Continued from page 115

Review of 1942.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Take it easy. This is merely the Review of the Year for Unknown Worlds.

First, "Hell Is Forever." It has all the creepy qualities of "None But Lucifer" and other "uncomfortables." The semi-humorous interlude with Father Satan—reminiscent of parts of "Jurgen"—came as a distinct relief which only heightened the grim surroundings. A once-in-a-year story; the kind which is earmarked as soon as read as The Best.

Next comes "Solomon's Stone." What a lovely imagination, Mr. de Camp.

Third, "Pobby." This author has a very refreshing style; it may either lead one to screamingly funny situations or to subtly horrible events. This one is a mixture of the two.

Fourth, "Compliments of the Author." It wouldn't rank so high, except for the beautifully ironical ending.

Fifth, "Design for Dreaming." Kuttner knows his Hollywood, and knows his fantasy.

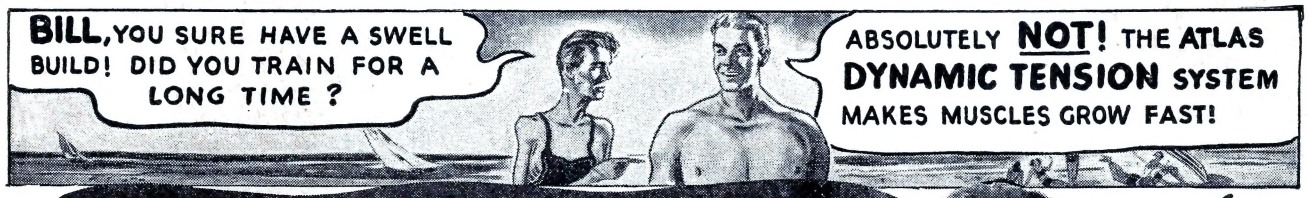
Sixth, "The Undesired Princess." Only in Unknown could wacky ideas like this one be developed fully.

Seventh, "The Sorcerer's Ship." As usual with Bok, there is not much story; but the description—the other-worldliness—the strange people and places—make it his best to date.

Eighth, "The Idol of the Flies." Just close enough to actual depiction of childhood—with Unknown's "distortion" formula applied—to cause the cold chills.

Ninth, "The Wall." Don't know just why! One of those things.

Tenth, "Though Poppies Grow," after a long session of arguing with myself and regretfully excluding about seven short stories. Brainstorm: why not give this nation-wide publication, in place of some of the tripe hacked out by our rather young and groping propaganda bureaus? I understand "Take My Drum to England," by Nelson S. Bond, was on the radio recently—nation-wide hookup. "We did it before, we can do it again—" Could be?—Paul Carter, 156 S. University Street, Blackfoot, Idaho.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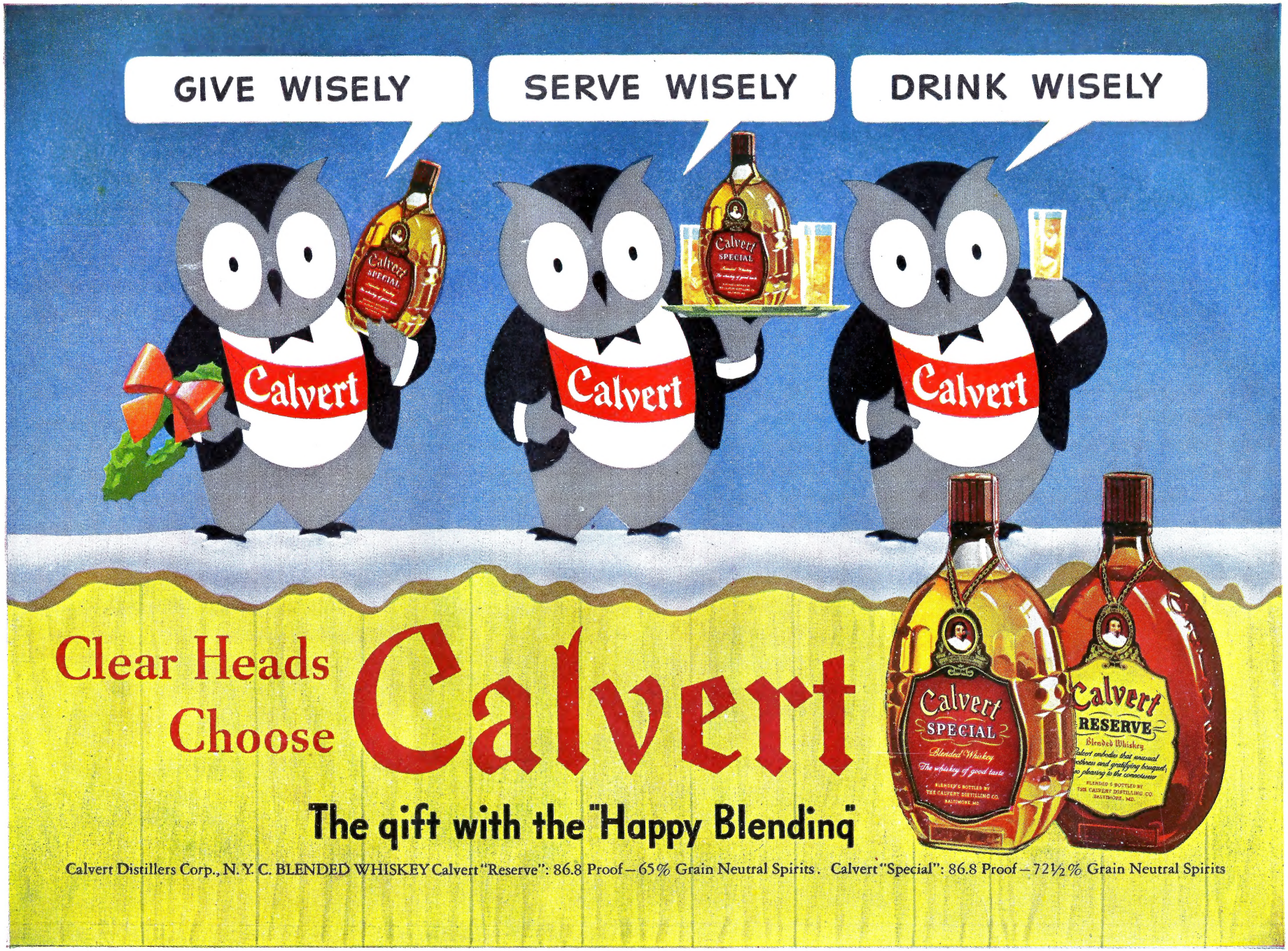

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve": 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits